

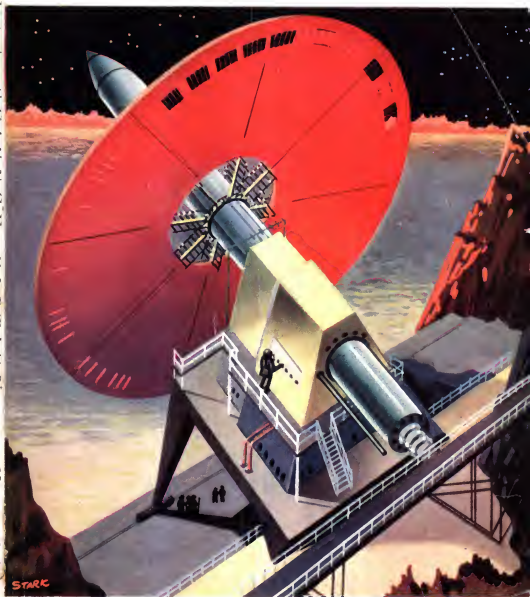
NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

MONTHLY

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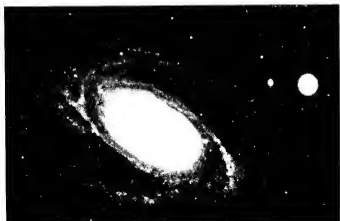
NUMBER 21



Stories by ERIC FRANK RUSSELL, BRIAN W. ALDISS, Etc.

FAR DISTANT FIRES . . .

The Great Nebula in Andromeda. Probably the most similar of all galaxies to our own. This photograph was taken with the 48 inch Schmidt camera.



Spiral Nebula Messier 81 in the constellation Ursa Major (The Great Bear). Photograph taken by the 200 inch Mount Palomar telescope.

. . . by KENNETH JOHNS

The picture of the expanding Universe has been prominent in astronomical circles for a number of years, so that the rise of new theories to challenge the old has been cautious. And yet today bold new ideas are being discussed to explain the red shift, the apparent outward movement of the galaxies and other mysterious phenomena of the heavens.

In September, 1956, the farthest measurement across the Universe yet

Continued on inside back cover

NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by PETER HAMILTON

Issue Number Twenty-one

Novel :

SOMEWHERE A VOICE	Eric Frank Russell	56
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Novelette :

TREASON	John Brunner	3
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Short Stories :

ALL THE WORLD'S TEARS	Brian W. Aldiss	24
THE POOL	A. Bertram Chandler	36
DREAM WORLD	Lan Wright	48

Special Features :

Look Here	The Editor	2
Something To Read	Kenneth F. Slater	102
Scientifilm Previews	Forrest J. Ackerman	106
Fanorama	Walter A. Willis	108
Guided Missives	The Readers	110

Front Cover by James Stark

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Look here . . .

Actually this is the second editorial I have written for NEBULA No. 21. The first marvelled at the quality of the stories—a task which I must now leave to you after you have read this special coming-of-age number—and cast an eye over the miraculous progress which our magazine has made in its first twenty-one issues.

I will now have to save this entire first editorial until NEBULA No. 50, or No. 100, or some other appropriate issue as, fittingly enough, I have an even more important matter which I must tell you about this time.

NEBULA is going monthly as from the current issue.

Yes, after four and a half years' of constant pressure from readers and several months of intensive preparation by myself, Britain's leading magazine devoted exclusively to science fiction will appear twelve times a year—on the 20th of every month—instead of six times per year as at present.

My time of preparation, although delaying the inauguration of the new monthly schedule has been well worth while as it makes certain that there will be no falling off in the quality of our stories—often the result of a more frequent publishing schedule with other magazines.

Jealously guarded in my files are a host of unforgettable new stories—most of them written especially for NEBULA by popular science fiction authors including William F. Temple, E. C. Tubb, E. R. James, Brian Aldiss, A. Bertram Chandler, etc., etc. The possibility of serialising longer stories has also received consideration but in the meantime I intend to adhere to the former policy of keeping each issue "complete unto itself."

So you see, there will be no shortage of first-rate science fiction reading in the new monthly NEBULA. All our usual features will also be maintained and where practicable improved.

Now that we have made this gesture in response to repeated requests from our readers for a monthly publishing schedule for NEBULA—and incurred the financial risk of so doing—we, the entire editorial and publishing staff of NEBULA look to you, our readers, to make it a success. Judging by your ever more enthusiastic reception of the magazine in the past we have no doubt that the new monthly schedule will be a resounding triumph.

Peter Hamilton

Treason

*They accepted the humans as their friends and leaders .
but sometimes first appearances can be very deceptive.*

Illustrated by John J. Greengrass

I floated somewhere to the galactic north of Cos and felt miserable. No-weight had always made me queasy. But I was plucked if I was going to show it, especially in front of Gow. I tried to concentrate on watching the strategists at work and to draw some consolation from the fact that all the other Luans present were in much the same state as I. •

It was curious, I reflected, that the only race in the Confederacy to be descended from avian progenitors was also the only one that had never properly adapted to free fall. Of course, Nwala and the rest of the Prebs had lived half their lives in similar conditions—under water—but the Tubaraleens were used to four times as much gravity as we Luans, while the Humans came of simian stock, and the psychologists said that the greatest fear of any creature which lived vertically by virtue of anything other than wings ought to be that of falling. Yet Gow—like the rest of his strange species—was diving around the room like a fish.

Still, there it was. The Humans had been longest in space, after all. Maybe long custom had eliminated their primal conditioning.

I looked enviously at Gow. He tugged at the long soft yellow strands which covered his head in place of a comb and wattles. He was beating out a knotty point of strategy with old jen Popra, the head of our Luan delegation, and it looked as if jen Popra was being out-argued.

I would never have expected anything else, of course.

Gow looked at me between his legs. "Hey, jen Durgil!" he called. "Let me have that squadron of Prebs, will you?"

I was immensely flattered that he should know my name, since after all he was the head of a delegation, and from the senior race at that, and I was only a junior clerk. With a glow of pleasure I answered, "Coming!" and unkeyed the stasis which kept the squadron in question from drifting.

My wings seemed to be all talons, and to crown it all, when I eventually freed the squadron and flicked it over to him, I misjudged my aim. It hit one of the intervening suns a glancing blow and missed Gow by the span of my wings. I cursed my clumsiness.

However, he reached out and caught it and thanked me before continuing his argument.

That was another thing I admired about the Humans. If that had been jen Popra, he would have bawled me out for a clumsy addlepat, but Humans were never too busy or in too much of a hurry to be polite and friendly.

From the set of jen Popra's comb, I could tell *he* wasn't feeling either polite or friendly just now. In fact, he was pretty close to losing his temper. Of course, I knew he'd put a lot of effort into his plan of attack, and from what I'd seen it was a good one. I also knew that—like most of the older Luans—he objected to the Humans having more or less taken the conduct of the war out of our hands. But if there were flaws in his scheme, it was as well that Gow should point them out.

I felt myself growing hot around the wattles at jen Popra's behaviour. It was embarrassing. I reminded myself that he was one of the older generation of Luans; he had been hatched and fledged at a time when we could still think in terms of our own tight little universe—of our seven planets, a sun and few miscellaneous asteroids.

I, on the other hand, was half his age. I'd grown up to look at things on a Galactic scale, and I wasn't so bothered about the glory of Lu—largely because Humans could do so many things a good deal better than we could. I didn't understand why jen Popra was so insistent to have his plan accepted flaws and all, when the lives of thousands—not all Luans—would depend on it when it was put into action.

Now he was getting annoyed because Gow wanted to use the squadron of Prebs I had just passed him to plug a gap that even I could have taken advantage of had I been attacking. Human-wise, Gow didn't argue when he saw that it was useless, but made the

curious shoulder-motion implying dismissal which had become so popular with my own people—shrugging—and suggested, "Suppose we put it to the computer?"

"Pluck the computer!" said jen Popra. I took notice of that! This, I thought, was going a little too far. After all, the computer was the ultimate authority, and if he was afraid to appeal to it that meant he was afraid he was wrong.

Fortunately, Nwala, the senior Preb, put my thoughts into words for me. He swung effortlessly between a lane of stars, manoeuvring his massive body with his two forward tentacles, and hung up a short distance from jen Popra.

"Why not?" he boomed. "You'll have to have it computed eventually. If you think my Prebs are going into action without a computed assessment, you're wrong."

jen Popra gave ground with bad grace.

"All right!" called Gow. "Stand by for computing!"

Technicians of all four races adjusted the stases which kept the stars moving precisely in their orbits, and the model ships in their tactical formation. We kicked, swung or flapped up between the stars to the wide platform overlooking the three-dimensional map.

It was a sight which never failed to awe me, though I made out I was as blase as the Humans who had built it—this slice of a universe in miniature. At present it depicted our own location—a region bounded on the north by the Human system of Cos, and on the south, beyond our own base at Polga, by unnamed enemy-held suns. It looked like a good bet that we could take some of those suns away from them—about six—but only the complex mind of the computer could decide whether we could do it without weakening ourselves.

Still, six systems would be a major conquest—the first in a long time—and I felt a surge of the excitement jen Popra must have felt as I watched the machine being prepared to act out the battle.

"What have we got on enemy fleet movements?" Gow asked another Human standing by at the master switchboard.

"Everything we could rake up," was the reply. "I've set the circuits for the optimum counter-blow, to leave a margin for accidents."

"Fine," Gow answered. "All right, get going."

And in the confines of the map two fleets swung into battle.

Behind me, on a wall screen, the computer projected its comments regarding the number of ships destroyed or crippled. Miniature flares added to the realism of the scene—it was as like

watching the real thing as the Humans had been able to make it, and that was almost perfect.

The time scale, of course, was accelerated. For the first few minutes everything seemed to be going perfectly. The flotillas were moving in according to schedule, each making for its own system—

“Look there!” said Nwala urgently in his booming bass voice, deepened by alarm until I could barely hear it. He pointed with an outflung tentacle.

The gap Gow had wanted to plug was widening by the moment, and from the uncharted darkness of enemy space a swarm of lights representing an indefinite number of their spacecraft poured up towards it. Ships changed course frantically, and the figures thrown on the wall behind me—ships probably lost—began to mount.

The total was at fifty-nine per cent of strength when Gow signalled to the other Human and the computer was shut off.

“Well?” he said, looking at jen Popra. “You saw what the computer has to say. The enemy could make us helpless for years by breaking through like that—”

“But that was an optimum counter-blow,” protested jen Popra.

“Doesn’t matter. We always have to assume the worst, don’t we? The enemy seem to be about as well apprised of our movements as we are of theirs.”

“He’s right,” rumbled Nwala. “We can’t risk losses on that scale.”

“And why not?” said jen Popra fiercely. “Before we had Human help, we won the battle of Argmit, didn’t we? We lost three thousand ships—but we took the system and we’ve never lost it again. Sometimes I think we Luans are the only ones with guts left!”

“That was a long time ago,” said Gow peaceably. “There isn’t any real need for that sort of thing. You haven’t suffered losses like that since, have you?”

“No, but we haven’t won any victories like that either!” crowed jen Popra. “How long is this war going to go on, anyway?”

Gow smiled. “I wish I knew,” he said seriously. “But we stand a better chance of coming out in one piece at the end if we save ourselves foolhardy risks by consulting the computers.”

“The computers!” said jen Popra with a wealth of scorn

in his voice. "*The computers ! Built by Humans, of course, and equally conditioned against getting their feathers singed !*"

Facarastulonga, the head of the Tubaraleen delegation, who up to now had been sitting silently within his refrigerated suit, must have hit the whole bank of studs on his speech simulator at once, for an angry bellow issued from it. The Tubaraleens had been allies of the Humans for longer than the Prebs or ourselves, and the two races understood each other so well that they rarely needed to disagree. But the insult to Humans implied in jen Popra's remark hit Facarastulonga where it hurt.

Gow waited till the echoes had died away. Then he said, "You know that's ridiculous. Now suppose we see what we can do to put that right—"

jen Popra turned and called the other members of our delegation. "Flap out of it, you ! We're going—I've had enough for one day !"

There was nothing very much I could do but obey. I knew jen Popra's temper when he was really aroused. But I thought he was being completely unreasonable.

Looking back as I followed the other Luans through the door, I saw Gow, an odd look of pity on his face, turning to Facarastulonga. He said something which I barely heard ; I thought it sounded like, "Someone's going to kick the old cock down the peck-order soon."

And he was quite right. The way jen Popra and the rest of our leaders were going on, what with their constant quarrelling with the Humans, one of the younger members of the command was going to start picking them off.

However, jen Popra seemed to have cooled down a bit by the time we got back to our flagship—the Grand Fleet was stacked in orbit for the duration of the conference, and we hadn't far to go. He dismissed us curtly and called a conference of the seniors.

I was glad to be back in familiar surroundings. The lack of perches in the gigantic Human vessel always made my feet sore. I hurried back to the coop I shared with jen Fazoul, one of the gunnery control staff, and spent a pleasant half-hour preening the temper out of me.

jen Fazoul came back from watch just as I was finishing.

"There's a real flap on !" he announced, tossing his computing-belt into his locker. "I hear rumours that jen Grobish has threatened to call jen Popra out. What's it all about, do you know ?"

I told him what had happened at the strategy conference. "jen Popra's flying for a stall," I opined positively, "and I for one wouldn't mind seeing it happen. Sometimes I think he was hatched from an addled egg. He just doesn't seem to think straight—"

"Oh, I don't know. You've got to admit he's got something. After all, we *haven't* won any important victories since the Humans started to run the war for us—"

"They did not start running the war for us! They happened to be fighting the same enemy and offered us their facilities, which we accepted."

"All right, if you like. But the yolk has gone out of us. What do we say now when a problem comes up? Not: how do we solve it? We say the Humans will know!"

"And don't they? They've been in space probably ten times as long as we have. Compared to them, we're fledglings."

"But they've taken our independence and guts away from us—or rather, we've given them away."

"Addled squawking!" I exploded. "Where's the sense in wasting time duplicating work that's already been done, when we can save ourselves the trouble? If you had your way, we'd still be flapping around in rockets instead of faster-than-light ships. We've got a lot to thank the Humans for."

"We're going to have a lot to curse them for in the long run."

I thought my temper had lain down; it must only have been broody. It got the better of me. "Where are you in the peck-order for the ship?" I said as calmly as I could.

"Seventeen-ninety-three," jen Fazoul answered startled. "Why?"

"Good—you're eight above me. I can call you out. I do."

He looked surly, but stretched his wings and agreed. We left the cabin and made for the gymnasium, where challenges between junior personnel had to be settled. The seniors, who had fewer and shorter combats, usually held theirs in the quarters forward.

We reported to the physical training instructor on duty, who noted our names, confirmed that I was junior to jen Fazoul in the current peck-roster and could call him out, and directed us to one of the challenge cages at the far end of the gym. It was up to us now.

It was nearly six weeks since I had last been challenged, and jen Fazoul was taller and heavier than myself, but I had been boiling up to this most of the day, and I came out—bleeding slightly and

short a few feathers on my right wing—but the winner.

I felt a glow of satisfaction that even the jump of eight places at once in the peck-order couldn't account for. Among the junior personnel, of course, you couldn't very well have an exact correspondence between a person's job and his place on the roster, though the top twenty or thirty places were always held by the holders of the senior officers' posts. This far down, it wasn't a serious measure of precedence.

But I felt obscurely as if I had gained a victory for a cause—for the younger realist faction who had got over being obsessed with the 'glory of Lu' and who had the sense to realise that our race was going ahead further and faster by taking advantage of the aid the Humans had been so kind in offering.

After all, the Tubaraleens had been allied with men for a couple of centuries, at least, and the Prebs about half that long, whereas we were comparatively new to the Confederacy. And the Prebs and Tubaraleens didn't seem to have come to any harm.

Of course, jen Fazoul and I didn't try to prolong the quarrel once we were out of the gym. jen Fazoul was really the fitter of us; it was against etiquette to demand a return match, but next week he would call out someone a few steps ahead of me and get his advantage back if he won.

We went to feed together, and afterwards he went to see a match between gunnery and engines for the figure-flying championship of the ship, while I returned to our coop and dozed on my perch.

I kept imagining jen Fazoul opposite me, and after a while—more to justify myself than for any other reason—began a sort of imaginary lecture to him, reviewing the historical background of our argument.

The war had begun about forty years before, when we Luans had had starflight for less than ten years. Three systems away from our home sun, we had lost a couple of ships unexpectedly. A third one, sent to find out what had happened, returned damaged and reported being attacked. The war began as easily as that.

The enemy appeared to surround us—or at least to hold stars over a wide area. To even that balance, we fought Argmit, and wound up with a hundred per cent increase in holdings.

While we were still preening our bent feathers, though, our fleet was alarmed by the approach of a gigantic and unidentified alien ship from a direction we had not explored. Assuming at first that

it belonged to the enemy, for we knew of no other race in space, panicky attacks had been launched.

But our weapons had no effect, and the occupants did not retaliate. When in the end we decided they could not be hostile, we made our first contact with the race called Humans—warm-blooded oxygen breathers like ourselves.

They—as they explained to us—were also engaged in fighting an interstellar war. The race we were struggling with was one of a group allied against them. They could always do with new assistance—would we consent to join them and their associates, the Prebs and Tubaraleens?

We would; we did. It came as a shock to discover that the Galaxy was actually full of alien beings, many more advanced than we were, but after the bittersweet victory of Argmit we were in no mood to refuse.

The Humans had been very good to us. They had undertaken a period of education, offering us science and knowledge which we would have spent centuries acquiring for ourselves. Our ships had gone into battle under Preb and Tubaraleen commanders until we had gained an idea of interstellar strategy, and a few years ago we Luans had been accepted as full-fledged members of the Confederacy.

No one in his right mind, I should have thought, would have quarrelled with that. It was perhaps annoying that the things we had been dreaming of fifty years ago should already have been done better by someone else—but on the other hand we had come ahead further and faster than we had any right to expect.

Of course, the Humans had gone the whole way by themselves. They had been alone when they went out into space; they had had to gain their experience without advice or aid from anyone. But they never hesitated about sharing their hard-won knowledge with us. They knew what they were doing, that was certain.

Most of us younger Luans admired the Humans tremendously for their achievements. We'd got over the stage of feeling jealous of them. jen Popra, and the rest of the older generation, hadn't. That was the real trouble.

But today I'd stood up for the enlightened, modern view. My win over jen Fazoul had been a sort of declaration of faith. I dozed off in a glow of self-satisfaction.

I was awoken by jen Fazoul scrambling off his perch and rummaging noisily for his equipment in his locker.

"What's up ? " I asked sleepily.

"Big news," he threw over his wing. "One of our scouts reported enemy ships moving up towards Polga, and we're going to intercept them."

I was awake immediately. Polga was our own re-fitting station. "I'd better get down to my section," I said. "Is the order out for battle stations yet ? "

My job as clerk to the strategic department entailed operating intership contact posts during fighting.

"Not yet," jen Fazoul said indifferently. "You needn't hurry. They've got the plan hatched out already ; everyone's been briefed."

"That's quick work," I said admiringly. "Computed and all? You really have to give it to those Humans."

"Humans be plucked," he answered with a short crow. "To jen Popra, you mean. This one, jen Durgil, is *all ours*."

He swooped out of the door and left me open-mouthed.

But this was insane !

I buckled on my instrument belt and hastened through the corridors, where everything had been galvanised into frantic activity, towards my section. It was only too true:

In the communications room, the air was full of booming voices from our neighbours in the Grand Fleet stack-up—the Prebs—demanding to know what we thought we were doing. jen Katzik, the officer in charge of communications and a personal friend of jen Popra, was listening to them with a weary expression.

As I entered and took my battle-stations perch, he called across the room to an orderly. "Shut them off ! " he commanded. "They'll find out what we're doing soon enough."

The orderly—looking mutinous—obeyed. I stared at the master chart projected on the wall and saw that the entire Luan contingent was moving out by itself, adopting a simple arrowhead formation aligned towards Polga. None of the Preb or Tubaraleen or Human ships were following us.

"We'll be massacred ! " I muttered to my neighbour on the next perch, looking at the enemy fleet that was shown moving towards us. I felt pale around the wattles.

He shrugged. "We can't just perch back and let them take Polga from us," he answered. "jen Popra knows what he's doing."

"I doubt it," I said. He gave me a withering glance.

"If you're so sure you know better, why don't you call him out ? He's only number one on the peck-roster."

"This is no time for joking."

"No time to be defeatist, either. It's up to us to show those addlebrained Humans that we're capable of running our own affairs. We've been treated as nestlings for too damned long!"

Before I could give the hot retort I wanted to, the air was suddenly filled with the sound of a Human voice from the PA squawkers on the walls. jen Katzik gave the orderly who was supposed to have turned them off a savage glare.

"jen Popra!" said the squawker. "This is Gow here. I'm afraid I don't know where you are in your flagship, so I'm speaking at random. I had to talk to you, though, so we energised your public address system by remote control." A hint of a chuckle. "A trick we hadn't told you about.

"As soon as we saw what you were trying to do, we gave your formation to the computers. We have, actually, rather better data on the composition and formation of the enemy fleet than you got from your one scout. We've known about them for two days.

"This is the computer report. If you go into battle with your present strength and disposition, you'll be beaten. You will also suffer sixty-one per cent losses plus or minus three."

An angry crow interrupted him. I recognised jen Popra.

"Pluck your computer, Gow! We've talked it over, and we're sick of being treated like fledglings ten minutes out of the egg. What I told you yesterday about the Human conduct of the war still stands. We're getting nowhere with you Humans in charge.

"I hope some Prebs and Tubaraleens are listening to this. Though probably they're so blinded by your clever talk they won't pay any attention."

"Every ship in the fleet is listening," put in Gow. "We want the other races to judge you for themselves."

"So much the better! It's high time they learned to. They'll be able to see what people with some guts can do against the enemy." His voice dropped, as if he was speaking to someone else.

"Shut the mis-hatched addlepatte off, can't you?"

"I'm sorry, but that's impossible," said Gow flatly. "I want to give you the latest intelligence reports on the size of the fleet you're going to meet. Maybe that'll help you change your mind."

jen Popra tried to shout him down, but gave up after a moment as the Human's voice went on inexorably, listing the enemy ships. My comb drooped as I listened. Twenty battleships—a hundred and six cruisers—four hundred destroyers—a thousand landing craft—It was almost half the size of the entire Grand Fleet!

When he had finished, jen Popra answered him defiantly.

"That settles it, Gow ! A fleet that size could only be meant to take our base on Polga. We need that base and we aren't going to let it go. We're leaving—for the glory of Lu !"

A strain of fanaticism rang in his voice

And the lights dimmed, and there was that curious wrenching feeling which always occurred when the ships went into faster-than-light drive. The chart on the wall showed our progress.

I looked sourly at my neighbour again. "So long, pal !" I said. "But if I get out of this alive. I *will* call jen Popra out. If *he's* still alive."

The battle was like the worst nightmare I ever suffered—but it was impossible to wake up.

jen Popra's plan of attack depended on surprise, and we lost the initiative before we left hyperspace. One of our wing units overshot and materialised in full view of an enemy outrider, and the game was up.

I tried to concentrate on my job and not to remember what was going on. It was easy enough while only the light units were engaged : there were individual skirmishes, and for a while our destroyers were picking off their landing craft like breaking eggs in a nest.

Not for long. Inside two hours, they had their battleships in action—great ugly things with a clumsy-looking but enormously effective warp drive unit sticking out like a wart amidships. Half a dozen cruisers could take one of those things, but equally half a dozen of their destroyers could take one of our cruisers, and the enemy had the ships and to spare.

In the end, they weren't even paying us much attention. They simply detailed one of their battleships to work its way towards our main formation, and it did so, making mincemeat of everything it met on the way. I would be in the middle of a sentence, relaying tactical information to a cruiser or destroyer, and the transmission would suddenly go dead on me. I'd turn up another ship—and that would vanish, too.

Four hours after the beginning of the battle, jen Popra switched on the PA system again and, with a world of sadness in his voice, ordered, "Prepare to withdraw !"

I looked up at the master chart and saw that for once he was being wise and cutting our losses. We'd only lost one battleship so far.

I was in the middle of putting the order out to all remaining



ships on an over-ride circuit, when there was a jar which shook the room and the lights went out. Screams filled the air ; the artificial gravity let go for an instant, and maps, papers and equipment—and Luans who hadn't been clamped to their perches—soared through the air.

The lights came on again, and so did the gravity. jen Katzik pulled himself back on his perch. "We've been hit !" he said inadequately, as a thin curl of smoke wound from a ventilator behind his head.

"I can't raise the control room, sir !" said a white-wattled orderly.

"Check all sections," jen Katzik told him harshly. The orderly nodded and obeyed.

It was a sorry tale. A guided missile had taken us forward, apparently. It had sprung the seams of the control room and laid waste the entire gunnery section, so that in fact we were defenceless. I thought of jen Fazoul when I heard that, and immediately wished I hadn't. He would be a singed and frozen corpse by now

"jen Durgil !"

I came back with a start at jen Katzik's call. "Sir?"

"Have we any battleships left?"

Astonished, I looked at the wall chart. The four survivors of five were still there, counting ourselves. jen Katzik, who looked beaten and weary, passed a wing across his comb and followed my eyes.

"So we have," he said dispiritedly. "Get hold of jen Marglu and tell him he's in command of the fleet. I seem to be the senior surviving member of our own crew—"

As I shouted to try and raise jen Marglu's ship on the other side of the chaotic battle, I heard him continue, "How about engines? How are they doing?"

"They think they can get us home, sir," was the answer.

"jen Durgil! Tell jen Marglu that we're crippled and have had to retire. Engines—get us out of here!"

They got us out of there—just. The stress system of the ship had been radically changed by the damage, and as we re-materialised not far from the rest of the Grand Fleet, the Top Emergency bells started ringing. We jumped for our spacesuits.

Lifecraft from the Preb, Tubaraleen and Human ships picked us out of the mass of tangled wreckage into which the ship shortly afterwards tore itself.

Fed and rested, and feeling a depression which no amount of preening could alleviate, the survivors from the communications department, including jen Katzik and myself, sat around a large coop—or rather cabin—in Gow's flagship, which had been put at our disposal. The tattered remnants of our own fleet could not find room for us yet.

I tried to make myself comfortable on the back of one of the chairs the Humans had brought in to serve as temporary perches, and thought sickly that I wouldn't have to live up to my boast to call out jen Popra. jen Popra was somewhere in the mess the missile had made of the control room.

jen Katzik spread his wings savagely and suddenly burst out, "Why the hell didn't they help us when they saw we were in trouble?"

"Yes, that's what I'd like to know!" said an elderly cock from Engines who had been picked up in the same lifecraft as ourselves. I didn't know his name.

Anger lent me boldness; I was about the youngest and also the most junior person present, but I spoke up. "It was our own

fault ! ” I said hotly. “ We couldn’t expect them to risk losses on the scale we suffered— ”

“ Do you think *they’d* have lost so much ? ” said jen Katzik icily. “ What do you know about it, anyway ? ”

I subsided, and he went on, “ There was something addled about that battle ! I was at the conference when they drew up the plan. Our scout’s report was perfectly accurate—at the time. There weren’t half the number of ships heading for Polga.”

“ That’s so,” put in someone. “ I handled the scout’s report. There were no battleships, for one thing.”

“ Where did all those other ships come from, then ? ” said the engineer. “ And how did the Humans get to know about them so quickly ? Tell me that ! ”

“ Exactly,” said jen Katzik. “ We use Human-designed scanners and detectors. They’re supposed to be the same models as those used aboard this ship. How come the Humans could know about the extra ships in the fleet and we didn’t ? ”

Defensively, since he seemed to be looking at me, I answered, “ Maybe we didn’t look in the right place— ”

“ That be plucked for an answer,” said jen Katzik flatly.

“ Do we want to win this war or don’t we ? ” said the engineer. “ That’s what it boils down to.”

“ Well,” I exploded, “ if after what you saw happen today you think we stand a better chance on our own, you’re crazy ! ”

“ Yes,” said jen Katzik. “ We can’t win the war on our own, and the Humans, who could, don’t seem to want to. Where does that leave us ? ”

“ Out of the nest and getting cold,” said the engineer coarsely. The rest of the group signified agreement. My blood boiled.

“ You can perch here, when Humans have done their best to stop us making fools of ourselves, and on top of that have saved our lives and given us shelter, and still say that ! ”

I dropped from my perch and hopped towards the door—I couldn’t fly in the high gravity and narrow confines of the Human ship. I tried to slam the door behind me to underline the words, but it closed automatically.

I found myself in a bare corridor—Humans never went in for fuss in their ships. There were doors at intervals, numbered in Human characters, which of course I could read, and I made a note of the one I had left so that I could go back to it. Then I started up the passage to let my temper cool off.

I must be close to the skin of the ship, I noticed, for after a

few yards I passed the entrance to a lifecraft lock. I wondered if they were going out to pick up any more of us damn-fool addlepated lamebrains. I felt sorry for my whole species.

I hadn't gone far when there were footsteps in the passage ahead of me, and a Human rounded a corner and almost bumped into me. I hopped back, apologising. The Human gave me a second look.

"Why, jen Durgil ! What are you doing here ?"

It was Gow.

Pleased, as ever, that he should recognise me, I told him. "One of your lifecraft picked me out of the wreck of jen Popra's ship and brought me in with some other Luans." I gave him the number of the cabin.

"I should have thought you'd have been more comfortable with somewhere to perch," he said solicitously. "You can't be feeling so good after what you've been through. If there aren't enough perches I can get some more—"

"That's all right," I interrupted, and explained why I had flown out. "But it wasn't reasonable to expect you to risk your feathers trying to get us out of a mess we were in through our own silly fault," I finished. "So I said so, and they didn't like it. They'll get over it."

"Of course they will," he answered. He suddenly gave a sharp exhalation—the action Humans call sighing. "I wish more of you Luans would see things that way," he added. "There's no place for emotional judgments and headstrong decisions in space, you know. We've had a long time to learn that."

"How long ?" I inquired, greatly daring. Gow seemed to be in a talkative mood, and I might never get another chance like this—to talk to a Human of such eminence alone.

"How long ?" he echoed. "About seven hundred years."

"Where did your race originally come from ?" I asked.

"Oh, an insignificant little planet with an ordinary sort of sun, out towards the Rim. It's gone now."

"Sun nova'd ?" I said sympathetically. I'd never heard about it.

"Not exactly." He glanced at a time-meter on his arm. "Your feet must be getting pretty stiff standing around under our gravity. Hadn't you better go back to your friends ?"

He was being polite—as usual—but I guessed he had no more time to spare, so I nodded and thanked him, and turned back the

way I had come.

But I didn't want to return to jen Katzik and the others—not yet. I didn't think I'd be exactly welcome. So I stopped when I was out of sight and settled down on the floor. I was fairly certain I wouldn't be noticed—the Humans were surprisingly few in number compared with the influence they had, and I knew from previous visits to their ships that hours might go by without my so much as seeing one of them in an isolated corridor like this one.

However, only a few minutes later, I heard footsteps again—two sets of them, this time—and Human voices. One of them sounded like Gow's.

I didn't want him to know that I'd failed to take his advice ; I looked around and saw that the airlock to the lifecraft was close at hand. I had no time to think about it, but dodged hastily through.

Instead of going past, however, the Humans halted just outside the entrance.

Cursing myself for an addlepatented nitwit, I dived through the entry to the vessel itself and ducked out of sight behind a row of acceleration seats just as the door opened again and Gow came through. He was talking to someone who remained outside.

"Don't be too long," said the Human I couldn't see. "jen Marglu wants to speak to you when he's feeling better. I hope he wants to apologise. He might get suspicious if you aren't here."

"Stall him," laughed Gow. "I won't be long, though—no longer than usual. I wish we could develop tight-band communication that would save us the trouble of personal contact. So long."

He shut the lock and crossed to the pilot's chair without looking in my direction. Watching him fasten the harness—there was only ship gravity in here, which would vanish as soon as we took off—I wondered : Suspicious ? Of what ? What was it they needed tight-band communication for—something they didn't want their allies to know of ?

The outer side of the lock slid aside in answer to a touch on a control button, and the starry blackness beyond was visible through the ports facing the pilot's chair. I felt sick with fright—and sicker because I kept hearing in my mind the accusations implied in jen Katzik's words a little while before.

What was this Human secret I had stumbled across ?

Gow was an expert pilot ; he barely bothered to refer to his instruments as he gentled the lifecraft out of the lock and swung it up around the gigantic hull of the ship—so close, that it must have been blanked out by the mass of the larger vessel from anyone watch-



ing with a scanner. Why didn't he go out openly if he had nothing to hide ?

We were still scant yards from the hull when he had it orientated as he wanted it, and something seemed to snap in my mind as I saw that our nose was aligned towards a sector I recognised—the direction from which the enemy battle-fleet had come !

I had scarcely got over the shock of realisation, when faster-than-light drive went on. It was rough ; there was no room in a little vessel like this for the complex, self-compensating stressed space fields mounted by a larger ship—

But then, there should not really have been room for a hyper-drive anyway.

We were going a long way. I realised that as the time ticked away. We would re-materialise well beyond the detector range of the Grand Fleet. That was another point against the Humans *why* the secretiveness ?

I had never before tried to look through vision ports in hyper-space ; I'd heard from Luans who had, though, that it was unpleasant. It was all of that. Yet Gow seemed to mind it not at all ; he kept his eyes fixed on the chaotic, seemingly patternless

shapes beyond the plastic and even hummed a song, very different from Luan music but with a kind of logic to it.

By the time we re-materialised, and I saw that the stars beyond the port belonged to the area occupied by the enemy, my mind was made up. Stealthily, I worked my way around the cabin towards the emergency toolkit; fortunately, since lifecraft belonging to any species might rescue members of another, I knew the layout.

I had to move fast; I was bound to make a noise in a moment.

But I had the axe out of the case before Gow had done more than look round sharply, and long before he could free himself from his harness. With a quick flap, I had crossed the cabin and poised the axe over his head. He wore a blaster at his belt; I snatched it away. It was made for Human hands, but I could operate it all right.

He fixed his eyes on the shining blade of the axe. "How did you get here, jen Durgil?" he said conversationally. "And what *are* you doing that for?"

I spoke with a heavy heart; I had trusted Humans all my life.

"Because you're a traitor," I said slowly. "Because you knew that we Luans were going to get beaten today. Because you warned the enemy to be ready for us!"

Outside the port another lifecraft winked into being; it matched velocities with us almost casually and started to sidle towards our airlock. I backed away from Gow, watching him.

"Don't try to warn your friend out there," I warned him. "I want to see what manner of being you sold us out to."

He made a move towards the radio switch; I discouraged him with a gesture. "Sit still," I ordered.

I backed into the corner of the cabin, where I could keep Gow covered without being spotted when the airlock was opened. The other ship touched with ours, and scaling tubes sprang out to form a passage linking the locks.

"Open the door," I said. "Go on."

Moving slowly, so as not to alarm me, Gow obeyed, and the door slid back. A voice came through.

"Hullo there, Gow. Sorry I'm late. How did your Luans come out of that little bust-up? We hurt them as little as possible, of course, but if you hadn't tipped us off the Kthalgs would have been wiped out."

So it was true. The Humans had sold us out. I felt a wave of sour despair.

Then there were steps in the connecting tube, and I tensed, waiting for whatever alien being might come through. Gow gave me a strange look—almost pitying—but I ignored him.

And the creature which came through the door—was a Human.

He was very quick on the sloop. He followed Gow's eyes and turned and saw me before I had a chance to recover from my first shock, and immediately took the blaster away from me. It was as simple as that ; my grip was nerveless.

Gow undid his harness and got up from the chair. "We had a reception committee on board, Harys," he said with a smile. "A stowaway. It was careless of me not to make sure the craft was empty when I came aboard, but we'd collected a party of Luans from a wreck, and this one got into the lock I left from."

Harys nodded, handing back the blaster to Gow. "So that's a Luan," he said, eyeing me with interest. "Very intriguing. What do we do about him ?"

Gow leaned against the back of the pilot's chair. I was too scared to do anything ; besides, I was outnumbered.

"I don't know," said Gow. "But this one—his name's jen Durgil, by the way—has always struck me as being one of the more intelligent of the younger generation of his species. You know they're having the same trouble as your Kthalgs at the moment—they're still suffering from leaders who dislike the idea of co-operation."

I raised my head. "You call it co-operation ?" I said bitterly. "Selling out to the enemy ?"

"To the enemy ?" said Gow quietly. "But Harys isn't my enemy. He's a Human."

And of course that was perfectly true. I made an effort and got a grip on myself. "What's the explanation, then ?" I said finally.

"It's quite simple." Harys spoke up. "I don't know how much you've guessed, but one thing should be clear. The war you're fighting—it is, of course, a set-up. It's phoney."

"Then what's the real thing like ?" I demanded, remembering jen Fazoul dead today.

"The real thing is like your battle of Argmit, only worse," said Gow evenly. "With a death-roll counted in millions and planets by the score laid waste forever."

"How much do these people know of our history ?" Harys inquired. "As much as the Tubaraleens ?"

"No ! Even the Prebs haven't been given the story yet." Gow eyed me speculatively. "It would be interesting to see if he can accept it, though. Listen to me, jen Durgil. You want to know how Humans come to be fighting on both sides, don't you ?"

"Are they ?" I was confused.

"Yes, we are. You were asking me earlier where my race came from. Well, originally it came from a planet which we can no longer inhabit. We destroyed it—a long time ago." He wiped his forehead.

"We developed in an isolated sector of space; we didn't meet another race early on, as you met the Kthalgs, or the Tubaraleens met the Hravaj. But we were a quarrelsome race, and too clever for ourselves. We took over several planets around other stars and colonised them, and in the end—as we always had done—we fought a war among ourselves.

"That war *was* the real thing. The only full-scale, merciless interstellar war ever fought. And it took us two hundred years to recover from it.

"The remnants of our race were scattered over a dozen systems. When we contacted other races also working towards space-flight, we did our best to show them the lesson we had learned, but they weren't having any. We were forced to fight again, once or twice, to prove we didn't want to, and that was ridiculous. It seems that when a race is just discovering starflight, it's too nervous to understand that a stranger is not necessarily an enemy.

"However, two hundred years ago we found a sort of answer. That was when the Tubaraleens were fighting the Hravaj ; they had bumped each other and immediately agreed to differ. So we offered help to both sides. It was—for once—gratefully accepted.

"We couldn't stop the war—but we could take it over from them, and we did. Because we are a scattered race, we could convincingly ally ourselves with both sides.

"The Tubaraleen war died a natural death a century or so ago—in stalemate. They've lived with us for five generations now; they'll be cured of their foolish pride pretty soon, and we'll send them off to do the same thing for someone else. There's a battle royal raging somewhere north of Cos between a couple of races we haven't got around to yet."

I was beginning to catch on. I was also beginning to regain some of my admiration for Humans. "How can I know this is true ?" I demanded.

"You can't," said Harys. He was blunt about it. "We can only ask you to take our word, and you don't feel like doing so at the moment. I'm afraid, jen Durgil, you've put yourself in an impossible position."

"*But*," said Gow softly, "he did at least have the sense to accept the possibility instead of ridiculing it; he's thinking with his brain instead of his feathers."

"True enough," nodded Harys.

Gow chuckled. "Don't worry, jen Durgil. We wouldn't punish you for making a mistake—we've made too many. Anyway, a Luan like you is too valuable to waste." He looked at Harys.

"How about finishing the job?"

"If you think it'll take this early. It's up to you—you know Luans and I don't."

"All right. Would you like to be number one on the peck-roster, jen Durgil? I can promise you that in twenty years if you agree to our plan."

"Which is—?"

"To prove to you that we are speaking the truth. It'll mean a long lonely time away from your own people, and we Humans are busy and sometimes difficult to live with. But if you want to see what we are trying to do, and then go back and help us get on with it, you may."

"I don't much want to be number one in peck-order," I said seriously. And it was true; I'd never had ambitions that way. "But I'd like to believe you. I've got no time for the 'glory of Lu' and the nonsense they rant about—I'd much rather make friends."

I put all the sincerity I was capable of into my voice.

Harys gave a surprised glance at Gow. "How long have you been working with these people? Same time as we've been on at the Kthalgs? Gow, either you're the better worker, or these people have more common sense than most I've met. I wish you luck—but I don't think, in this case, you're going to need it." He put out his hand, and I gave him my wingtip.

"I'm sorry I called you traitors," I said. "That time I was thinking with my feathers."

"Don't let it worry you," chuckled Harys, turning to leave the ship. "The traitor who chooses the winning side becomes a hero—and in this case, both sides are going to win. So long."

All the World's Tears

*Love and joy had died—slowly, but who
could wonder at the stirrings of the corpse?*

Illustrated by Arthur Thomson.

If you could collect up all the tears that have fallen in the history of the world, you would have not only a vast sheet of water : you would have the history of the world.

Some such reflection as this occurred to J. Smithlao, the psychodynamician, as he stood in the 139th sector of Ing Land and watched the brief and tragic love of the wild man and Charles Gunpat's daughter. Hidden behind a beech tree, Smithlao saw the wild man walking warily across the terrace ; Gunpat's daughter, Ployploy, stood at the far end of the terrace, waiting for him.

It was the last day of summer in the last year of the forty-fourth century. The wind that rustled Ployploy's dress breathed leaves against her ; it sighed round the fantastic and desolate garden like fate at a christening, ruining the last of the roses. Later, the tumbling pattern of petals would be sucked from paths, lawn and patio by the steel gardener. Now, it made a tiny tide round the wild man's feet as he stretched out his hand, momentarily, to touch Ployploy.

Then it was that the tear glittered in her eyes.

Hidden, fascinated, Smithlao the psychodynamician saw the tear. Except perhaps for a stupid robot, he was the only one who saw it, the only one who saw the whole episode. And although he was shallow and hard by the standards of other ages, he was human enough to sense that here—here on the greying terrace—was a little charade that marked the end of all that Man had been.

After the tear, of course, came the explosion. For just a minute, a new wind lived among the winds of earth.

Only by accident was Smithlao walking in Charles Gunpat's estate. He had come on the routine errand, as Gunpat's psychodynamician, to administer a hate-brace to the old man. Oddly enough, as he swept in for a landing, leaving his vane down from the stratosphere, Smithlao had caught a glimpse of the wild man approaching Gunpat's estate.

Under the slowing vane, the landscape was as neat as a blue-point. The impoverished fields made impeccable rectangles. Here and there, one robot machine or another kept nature to its own functional image; not a pea podded without cybernetic supervision; not a bee bumbled among stamens without radar check being kept of its course. Every bird had a number and a call sign, while among every tribe of ants marched the metallic teller ants, tell-taling the secrets of the nest back to base. The old, comfortable world of random factors had vanished under the pressure of hunger.

Nothing living lived without control. The countless populations of previous centuries had exhausted the soil. Only the severest parsimony, coupled with fierce regimentation, produced enough nourishment for the present sparse population. The billions had died of starvation; the hundreds who remained lived on starvation's brink.

In the sterile neatness of the landscape, Gunpat's estate looked like an insult. Covering five acres, it was a little island of wilderness. Tall and unkempt elms fenced the perimeter, encroaching on the lawns and house. The house itself, the chief one in Sector 139, was built of massive stone blocks. It had to be strong to bear the weight of the servo-mechanisms which, apart from Gunpat and his daughter, Ployploy, were its only occupants.

It was just as Smithlao dropped below tree-level, that he thought he saw a human figure plodding towards the estate. For a multitude of reasons, this was very unlikely. The great material

wealth of the world being now shared among comparatively few people, nobody was poor enough to have to walk anywhere. Man's increasing hatred of Nature, spurred by the notion it had betrayed him, would make such a walk purgatory—unless the man were insane, like Ployplay.

Dismissing the figure from his thoughts, Smithlao dropped the vane onto a stretch of stone. He was glad to get down—it was a gusty day, and the piled cumulus he had descended through had been full of air pockets. Gunpat's house, with its sightless windows, its towers, its endless terraces, its unnecessary ornamentation, its massive porch, lowered at him like a forsaken wedding cake.

There was activity at one. Three wheeled robots approached from different directions, swivelling light atomic weapons at him as they drew near.

Nobody, Smithlao thought, could get in here uninvited. Gunpat was not a friendly man, even by the unfriendly standards of his time.

"Say who you are," demanded the leading machine. It was ugly and flat, vaguely resembling a toad.

"I am J. Smithlao, psychodynamician to Charles Gunpat," Smithlao replied; he had to go through this procedure every visit. As he spoke, he revealed his face to the machine. It grunted to itself, checking picture and information with its memory. Finally it said, "You are J. Smithlao, psychodynamician to Charles Gunpat. What do you want?"

Cursing its monstrous slowness, Smithlao told the robot, "I have an appointment with Charles Gunpat at ten hours," and waited while that was digested.

"You have an appointment with Charles Gunpat at ten hours," the robot finally confirmed. "Come this way."

It wheeled about with surprising grace, speaking to the other two robots, reassuring them, repeating mechanically to them, "This is J. Smithlao, psychodynamician to Charles Gunpat. He has an appointment with Charles Gunpat at ten hours," in case they had not grasped these facts.

Meanwhile, Smithlao spoke to his vane. A part of the cabin, with him in it, detached itself from the rest and lowered wheels to the ground, becoming a mobile sedan. Carrying Smithlao, it followed the other robots.

Automatically, screens came up, covering the windows, as Smithlao was now moving into the presence of other humans. He could only see and be seen via telescreens. Such was the hatred

(equals fear) man bore for his fellow man, he could not tolerate regarding him direct.

One following another, the machines climbed along the terraces, through the great porch, where they were covered in a mist of disinfectant, along a labyrinth of corridors, and so into the presence of Charles Gunpat.

Gunpat's dark face on the screen of his sedan showed only the mildest distaste for the sight of his psychodynamician. He was usually as self-controlled as this it told against him at his business meetings, where the idea was to cow one's opponents by splendid displays of rage. For this reason, Smithlao was always summoned to administer a hate-brace when something important loomed on the day's agenda.

Smithlao's machine manoeuvred him within a yard of his patient's image, much closer than courtesy required.

"I'm late," Smithlao began, matter-of-factly, "because I could not bear to drag myself into your offensive presence one minute sooner. I hoped that if I left it long enough, some happy accident might have removed that stupid nose from your—what shall I call it?—*face*. Alas, it's still there, with its two nostrils sweeping like rat-holes into your skull. I've often wondered, Gunpat, don't you ever catch your big feet in those holes and fall over?"

Observing his patient's face carefully, Smithlao saw only the faintest stir of irritation. No doubt about it, Gunpat was a hard man to rouse. Fortunately, Smithlao was an expert at his profession; he proceeded to try the insult subtle.

"But of course you would never fall over," he proceeded "Because you are too depressingly ignorant to know up from down. You don't even know how many robots make five. Why, when it was your turn to go to the capital to the Mating Centre, you didn't even realise that was the one time a man has to come out from behind his screen. You thought you could make love by tele! And what was the result? One dotty daughter one dotty daughter, Gunpat! Think how your rivals at Automotion must titter at that, sunny boy. 'Potty Gunpat and his dotty daughter,' they'll be saying. 'Can't control your genes,' they'll be saying."

The taunts were having their desired effect. A flush spread over the image of Gunpat's face.

"There's nothing wrong with Ployploy except that she's a recessive—you said that yourself!" he snapped.

He was beginning to answer back; that was a good sign. His daughter was always a soft spot in his armour.

"A recessive!" Smithlao sneered. "How far back can you recede? She's *gentle*, do you hear me, you with the hair in your ears? She wants to *love*!" He bellowed with ironic laughter. "Oh, it's obscene, Gunnyboy! She couldn't hate to save her life. She's no better than a savage. She's worse than a savage, she's mad!"

"She's not mad," Gunpat said, gripping both sides of his screen. At this rate, he would be primed for the conference in ten more minutes.

"Not mad?" the psychodynamician asked, his voice assuming a bantering note. "No, Ployploy's not mad—the Mating Centre only refused her the right even to breed, that's all. Imperial Government only refused her the right to a televote, that's all. United Traders only refused her a Consumption Rating, that's all. Education Inc only restricted her to beta recreations, that's all. She's a prisoner here because she's a genius, is that it? You're crazy, Gunpat, if you don't think that girl's stark, staring looney. You'll be telling me next, out of that grotesque, flapping mouth, that she hasn't got a white face."

Gunpat made gobbling sounds.

"You dare to mention that!" he gasped. "And what if her face is—that colour?"

"You ask such fool questions, it's hardly worth while bothering with you," Smithlao said mildly. "Your trouble, Charles Gunpat, is that your big bone head is totally incapable of absorbing one single simple historical fact. Ployploy is white because she is a dirty little throwback. Our ancient enemies were white. They occupied this part of the globe, Ing Land and You-Rohp, until the twenty-fourth century, when our ancestors rose from the East and took from them the ancient privileges they had so long enjoyed at our expense. Our ancestors intermarried with such of the defeated that survived.

"In a few generations, the white strain was obliterated, diluted, lost. A white face has not been seen on earth since before the terrible Age of Over-Population: fifteen hundred years, let's say. And, *then*—then little lord recessive Gunpat throws one up neat as you please. What did they give you at Mating Centre, sunny boy, a *cavewoman*!"

Gunpat exploded in fury, shaking his fist at the screen.

"You're sacked, Smithlao," he snarled. "This time you've gone too far, even for a dirty, rotten psycho! Get out! Go, get, and never come back again!"

Abruptly, he bellowed to his auto-operator to switch him over to the conference. He was just in a ripe mood to deal with Automotion and its fellow crooks.

As Gunpat's irate image faded from the screen, Smithlao sighed and relaxed. The hate-brace was accomplished. It was the supreme compliment in his profession to be dismissed by a patient at the end of a session; Gunpat would be all the keener to re-engage him next time. All the same, Smithlao felt no triumph. In his calling, a thorough exploration of human psychology was needed; he had to know exactly the sorest points in a man's makeup. By playing on those points deftly enough, he could rouse the man to action.

Without being roused, men were helpless prey to lethargy, bundles of rag carried round by machines. The ancient drives had died and left them.

Smithlao sat where he was, gazing into both past and future.

In exhausting the soil, man had exhausted himself. The psyche and a vitiated topsoil could not exist simultaneously; it was as simple and as logical as that.

Only the failing tides of hate and anger lent man enough impetus to continue at all. Else, he was just a dead hand across his mechanised world.

So this is how a species becomes extinct! thought Smithlao, and wondered if anyone else had thought it. Perhaps Imperial Government knew all about it, but was powerless to do anything; after all, what more could you do than was being done?

Smithlao was a shallow man—inevitably so in a caste-bound society so weak that it could not face itself. Having discovered the terrifying problem, he set himself to forget it, to evade its impact, to dodge any personal implications it might have. With a grunt to his sedan, he turned about and ordered himself home.

Since Gunpat's robot had already left, Smithlao travelled back alone the way he had come. He was trundled outside and back to the vane, standing silent below the high elms.

Before the sedan incorporated itself back into the vane, a movement caught Smithlao's eye. Half concealed by a verandah, Ployploy stood against a corner of the house. With a sudden impulse of curiosity, Smithlao got out of the sedan. The open air, besides being in motion, stank of roses and clouds and green things turning dark with the thought of autumn. It was frightening for Smithlao, but an adventurous twinge made him go on.

The girl was not looking in his direction; she peered towards



the barricade of trees which cut her off from the outside world. As Smithlao approached, she moved round to the rear of the house, still staring intently. He followed with caution, taking advantage of the cover afforded by a small plantation. A metal gardener nearby continued to wield shears along a grass verge, unaware of his existence.

Ployploy now stood at the back of the house. Here a rococo fancy of ancient Italy had mingled with a Chinese genius for fantastic portal and roof. Balustrades rose and fell, stairs marched through circular arches, grey and azure eaves swept almost to the ground. But all was sadly neglected: virginia creeper, already hinting at its glory to come, strove to pull down the marble statuary; troughs of rose petals clogged every sweeping staircase. And all this formed the ideal background for the forlorn figure of Ployploy.

Except for her delicate pink lips, her face was utterly pale. Her hair was utterly black; it hung straight, secured only once, at the back of her head, and then falling in a tail to her waist. She looked mad indeed, her melancholy eyes peering towards the great elms as if they would scorch down everything in their line of vision.

Inevitably, Smithlao turned to see what she stared at so compellingly.

The wild man was just breaking through the thickets round the boles of the elms.

A sudden shower came down, rattling among the dry leaves of the shrubbery. Like a spring shower, it was over in a flash ; during the momentary downpour, Ployploy never shifted her position, the wild man never looked up. Then the sun burst through, cascading a pattern of elm shadow over the house, and every flower wore a jewel of rain.

Smithlao thought of what he had thought in Gunpat's room. Now he added this rider — it would be so easy for Nature, when parasite man was extinct, to begin again.

He waited tensely, knowing a fragment of drama was about to take place before his eyes. Across the sparkling lawn, a tiny tracked thing scuttled, pogo-ing itself up steps and out of sight through an arch. It was a perimeter guard, off to give the alert.

In a minute, it returned. Four big robots came with it ; one of them Smithlao recognised as the toad-like machine that had challenged his arrival. They threaded their way purposefully among the rose bushes, five different-shaped menaces. The metal gardener muttered to itself, abandoned its clipping, and joined the procession towards the wild man.

"He hasn't a dog's chance," Smithlao said to himself. The phrase held significance : all dogs, having been declared redundant, had long since been exterminated.

By now the wild man had broken through the barrier of the thicket and come to the edge of the lawn. He broke off a leafy branchlet and stuck it into his shirt so that it partially obscured his face ; he tucked another branch in his trousers. As the robots drew nearer, he stopped, raising his arms above his head, a third branch clasped in his hands.

The six machines encircled him.

The toad robot clicked, as if deciding on what it should do next.

"Say who you are," it demanded.

"I am a rose tree," the wild man said.

"Rose trees bear roses. You do not bear roses. You are not a rose tree," the steel toad said. Its biggest, highest gun came level with the wild man's solar plexus.

"My roses are dead already," the wild man said, "But I have leaves still. Ask the gardener if you do not know what leaves are."

"This thing is a thing with leaves," the gardener said at once in a deep voice.

"I know what leaves are. I have no need to ask the gardener. Leaves are the foliage of trees and plants which give them their green appearance," the toad said.

"This thing is a thing with leaves," the gardener repeated, adding, to clarify the matter. "The leaves give it a green appearance."

"I know what things with leaves are," said the toad. "I have no need to ask you, gardener."

It looked as if an interesting, if limited, argument would break out between the two robots, but at this moment one of the other machines spoke.

"This rose tree can speak," it said.

"Rose trees cannot speak," the toad said at once. Having produced this pearl, it was silent, probably mulling over the strangeness of life. Then it said, slowly, "Therefore either this rose tree is not a rose tree or this rose tree did not speak."

"This thing is a thing with leaves," began the gardener again. "But it is not a rose tree. Rose trees have stipules. This thing has no stipules. It is a breaking buckthorn. The breaking buckthorn is also known as the berry-bearing alder."

This specialised knowledge obviously extended beyond the vocabulary of the toad. A strained silence ensued.

"I am a breaking buckthorn," the wild man said, still holding his pose. "I cannot speak."

At this, all the machines began to talk at once, lumbering round him for better sightings as they did so, and barging into each other in the process. Finally, the toad's voice broke above the metallic babble.

"Whatever this thing with leaves is, we must uproot it. We must kill it," it said.

"You may not uproot it. That is a job only for gardeners," the gardener said. Setting its shears rotating, telescoping out a mighty scythe, it charged at the toad.

Its crude weapons were ineffectual against the toad's armour. The later, however, realised that they had reached a deadlock in their investigations.

"We will retire to ask Charles Gunpat what we shall do," it said. "Come this way."

"Charles Gunpat is in conference," the scout robot said. "Charles Gunpat must not be disturbed in conference. Therefore

we must not disturb Charles Gunpat."

"Therefore we must wait for Charles Gunpat," said the metal toad impeturbably. He led the way close by where Smithlao stood; they all climbed the steps and disappeared into the house.

Smithlao could only marvel at the wild man's coolness. It was a miracle he still survived. Had he attempted to run, he would have been killed instantly, for that was a situation the robots had been taught to cope with. Nor would his double talk, inspired as it was, have saved him had he been faced with only one robot, for a robot is a single-minded creature. In company, however, they suffer from a trouble which often afflicts human gatherings to a lesser extent: a tendency to show off their logic at the expense of the object of the meeting.

Logic! That was the trouble. It was all robots had to go by. Man had logic and intelligence—he got along better than his robots. Nevertheless, he was losing the battle against Nature. And Nature, like the robots, used only logic! It was a paradox against which man could not prevail.

Directly the file of machines had disappeared into the house the wild man ran across the lawn and climbed the first flight of steps, working towards the motionless figure of the girl. Smithlao slid behind a beech tree to be nearer to them; he felt like a pervert, watching them without an interposed screen, but he could not tear himself away. The wild man was approaching Ployplay now, moving slowly across the terrace as if hypnotised.

"You were resourceful," she said to him. Her white face carried pink in its cheeks now.

"I have been resourceful for a whole year to get you," he said. Now his resources had brought him face to face with her, they failed, and left him standing helplessly. He was a thin young man, thin and sinewy, his clothes worn, his beard unkempt.

"How did you find me?" Ployplay asked. Her voice, unlike the wild man's, barely reached Smithlao. A haunting look, as fitful as the autumn, played on her face.

"It was a sort of instinct—as if I heard you calling," the wild man said. "Everything that could possibly be wrong with the world is wrong. Perhaps you are the only woman in the world who loves; perhaps I am the only man who could answer. So I came. It was natural. I could not help myself."

"I always dreamed someone would come," she said. "And for weeks I have felt—*known*—you were coming. Oh, my darling. . ."

"We must be quick, my sweet," he said. "I once worked with robots—perhaps you could see I knew them. When we get away from here, I have a robot plane that will take us right away—anywhere : an island, perhaps, where things are not so desperate. But we must go before your father's machines return."

He took a step towards Ployploy.

She held up her hand.

"Wait ! " she implored him. "It's not so simple. You must know something. The .the Mating Centre refused me the right to breed. You ought not to touch me."

"I hate the Mating Centre!" the wild man said. "I hate everything to do with the ruling regime. Nothing they have done can affect us now."

Ployploy had clenched her hands behind her back. The colour had left her cheeks. A fresh shower of dead rose petals blew against her dress, mocking her.

"It's so hopeless," she said. "You don't understand.

His wildness was humbled now.

"I threw up everything to come to you," he said. "I only desire to take you into my arms."

"Is that all, really all, all you want in the world?" she asked.

"I swear it," he said simply.

"Then come and touch me," Ployploy said.

That was the moment at which Smithlao saw the tear glint in her eye.

The hand the wild man extended to her was lifted to her cheek. She stood unflinching on the grey terrace, her head high. And so the loving hand gently brushed her countenance. The explosion was almost instantaneous.

Almost. It took the traitorous nerves in Ployploy's epidermis only a fraction of a second to analyse the touch as belonging to another human being and convey their findings to the nerve centre ; there, the neurological block implanted by the Mating Centre in all mating rejects, to guard against just such a contingency, went into action immediately. Every cell in Ployploy's body yielded up its energy in one consuming gasp. It was so successful that the wild man was also killed by the detonation.

Yes, thought Smithlao, you had to admit it was neat. And, again, logical. In a world on the very brink of starvation, how else to stop undesirables from breeding? Logic against logic, man's pitted against Nature's that was what caused all the tears of the world.

He made off through the dripping plantation, heading back for the vane, anxious to be away before the robots reappeared. The shattered figures on the terrace were still, already half-covered with leaves and petals. The wind roared like a great triumphant sea in the tree-tops. It was hardly odd that the wild man did not know about the neurological trigger: few people did, bar psychodynamicians and the Mating Council—and, of course, the rejects themselves. Yes, Ployploy knew what would happen. She had chosen deliberately to die like that.

"Always said she was mad!" Smithlao told himself. He chuckled as he climbed into his machine, shaking his head over her lunacy.

It would be a wonderful point to rile Charles Gunpat with next time he needed a hate-brace.

BRIAN W. ALDISS

NEBULA AUTHOR'S AWARD 1956

We are pleased to announce that as a result of the five Guinea Prize Polls on the stories published in NEBULA during 1956, E. C. Tubb has been chosen by NEBULA readers as their favourite author during that year. This is the fourth consecutive year in which Mr. Tubb has been voted most popular author by NEBULA readers and he accordingly wins our £20 Award as author of the year.

Second in order of preference was that young up and coming writer John Brunner, while William F. Temple very deservedly fills third place.

Top NEBULA discovery is Philip E. High (5th) while the favourite American author to have a story in NEBULA during 1956 was Robert A. Heinlein (10th).

Although many thousands of readers cast votes for their favourite stories in 1956 we would like even more of you to do so this year. Remember that by casting your vote you are helping your favourite author to win an attractive cash prize and that you have a chance of winning a guinea yourself. There is a ballot form on page 105.

The Pool

It was the opening to another place . . . a place where it was safest to let mystery lurk.

Illustrated by Arthur Thomson.

We weren't all happy to be spending the weekend in Port Danby. We had hoped to spend it in Melbourne—but three days of unremitting rain, commencing with our arrival alongside the single rickety jetty, had ensured that the discharge of our six hundred tons odd of outward general cargo for the port could not commence until the Saturday morning. Work, of course, finished at noon.

As we sat down to lunch in the saloon we continued the conversation we had started over our pre-luncheon gin.

"What a dump!" complained the Second Mate. "One main street. Two chain stores. Two cinemas—both showing ten year old Horse Opera. Three pubs—and they shut at six. ."

The Third and Fourth agreed with him.

"The trouble with all you people," said the Radio Officer, "is that even though you are seamen you are incurable city slickers. You wouldn't dream of coming ashore with me this afternoon for a good, healthy, country walk. No, not you. You'll go to your

rooms to sulk, and then you'll press your settees until afternoon tea time. .” He turned to me. “What do you say, Number One ?”

“I intend to press *my* settee, Sparks—and God help anybody who disturbs me before four. ”

The Old Man came in just then, bringing with him the local Agent, whom he had been entertaining. I sighed. After a couple of his king size pink gins the Captain was invariably in far too argumentative a mood to make for a pleasantly tranquil meal. I devoted my attention to my plate of oxtail and waited for the sparks to begin to fly. I didn't have long to wait.

“Mr. Winston !” bawled the Old Man suddenly. “You'll bear me out. Haven't I always said so ? ”

“Haven't you always said what, sir ?”

“You weren't listening. I've always said that if some fool says some damn' silly thing long enough and loud enough all the other fools will believe him ! ”

“Yes,” I lied.

“There you are, Carroll. My Chief Officer agrees.”

Carroll, the Agent, sucked the soup from the fringes of his straggling sandy moustache.

He said, his voice hostile, “I'm not a fool, Captain. And the Chief Officer doesn't know what it is we were talking about.”

“What was it, Mr. Carroll ? ” I asked, trying to ignore the Old Man's glare.

“I told Captain Jevons that there's a bottomless waterhole just ten miles out of town. ”

The Old Man threw his knife and fork down with a clatter.

“Bottomless, the man says ! Just because some child of three stepped into it went in over his poor little fat head ! *Bottomless !* ”

Carroll had gone pale with anger.

“I'm not used to being called a liar, Captain ! ” He fumbled in his inside breast pocket. “And here's ten pounds that says I'm not ! ”

The Old Man sneered. It didn't suit his fat, ruddy face.

“Here's my ten pounds.” He laid down two fivers. “Now—where's your proof ? ”

“You prove *your* statement, Captain ! ”

The pair of them glared at each other. The other officers and myself bent over our plates, waiting for the storm to pass. The tense silence was broken by Sparks.

“May I make a suggestion, sir ? ”

“What is it ? ”

"We have a sounding machine aboard the ship.

The Old Man almost smiled, then he frowned more heavily.

"It wouldn't be any good. You'll not find any power points ten miles out in the bush. Besides—aren't your hammers and diaphragms and things away down in the ship's bottom?"

Sparks grinned.

"I didn't mean *my* sounding machine, sir. I didn't mean the echo sounder. I meant that Armstrong Patent affair on the poop!"

The Old Man *did* smile this time. The rest of us scowled at the Radio Officer. We had a shrewd idea that by his fatuous suggestion he had effectively ruined all chances of a Saturday afternoon sleep.

We were right.

At about half past three that afternoon Carroll, driving a rather battered utility, was back alongside the gangway. He was followed by his brother, driving an equally battered saloon. By this time we were ready. The unfortunate cadets, working under the Second Mate's direction, had freed the bolts holding the patent sounding machine to the deck, and staggered amidships and down the gangway with the heavy hand winch. Meanwhile, I had managed to raise a couple of baulks of timber that would be, I hoped, long enough to provide a base for the machine over the waterhole.

We loaded all our gear into the utility—the machine, a couple of sinkers, chemical tubes and the scale, a spare reel of wire, the timber. The Old Man refused to ride with the Agent, but climbed into the saloon with Carroll's brother. The Second Mate, the Third and Sparks, got into the back seat. I rode with Carroll in the utility, the Fourth Mate and the four cadets clambering into the back and trying to make themselves comfortable among the sounding equipment.

One of our firemen, staggering back from the nearest pub, stopped and surveyed us owlishly. He must have heard of what we were doing.

"Bring us back some bunyip feathers," he said at last, with drunken solemnity.

That reminded me of something. If we had to do this crazy job at all we might as well do it properly. I sent one of the boys hurrying back on board to find some tallow for arming the lead.

So we set out, the Agent's brother leading in his saloon. There weren't many people abroad, even though the day was fine. One car, however, joined our little procession. I recognised the driver

—it was the reporter of the local rag ; he had been nosing around the ship for news when we first came in, as is the habit of pressmen in small ports when overseas vessels visit them.

The drive out was pleasant enough. It wasn't long before we were well clear of the little town, rolling along a reasonably good road that wound between hills that, in spite of the recent rain, were a sunburned brown rather than green. The only trees were occasional, untidily ragged gums. The only animals were sheep—and there weren't many of them.

The road dipped suddenly, and as the car dropped into the surprisingly deep valley I felt a sudden sense of chill. I must have shivered noticeably.

"Temperature always drops here," said the Agent. "Even in mid-summer it's cold. "

"Must be a popular place in summer, then."

"It's not. Even the birds and animals stay away from it."

"Probably some mineral poison in the water."

"No. It's perfectly good. *And* bottomless."

"We shall see," I said.

"You will," he replied.

Ahead of us the saloon had slowed to a halt. As we stopped the Agent's brother was already getting out, followed closely by the Old Man, the Second and Third Mates and Sparks. We pulled up suddenly. Behind us I heard the Fourth Mate curse as he fell against the iron frame of the sounding machine. The Agent opened his door and got out. I opened mine and did likewise.

Leaving the others to unload the gear I walked with the Old Man and the Carroll brothers to the waterhole. It was about a hundred yards from the road and was in the middle of a saucerlike depression. At first glance the only thing abnormal about it was its unnatural regularity—it appeared to be a perfect circle. Then I saw that the ground all around it was completely bare of vegetation. No grass, nothing at all, was growing on the red, sandy soil in which glittered tiny fragments of mica or some other mineral.

We walked to the edge of the pool. The water was crystal clear, and dark, although it seemed that, deep down, tiny specks of light swam in it. With its vertical sides the thing was more like a man-made well than a natural waterhole. It must have been, I thought, the result of volcanic action. I bent down cautiously, dipped my fingers in the water. It was cold, far colder than it should have been. My fingers, after a second's immersion, were numbed.

The Old Man was talking to the reporter.

"Yes, we've two hundred and seventy fathoms of wire on the machine—that's five hundred and forty yards. And I'll guarantee that we get bottom in less than half of that. . "

"What if you don't, Captain?" asked the pressman.

"Then we bend on the spare reel and try deeper."

I was busy then, supervising the setting up of the sounding machine. We pushed the two baulks of timber to the edge of the pool and then rolled them over and over until they were spanning it. We had a few anxious moments getting the sounding machine out into the middle of the rough bridge, but we managed it without losing it. We lashed the framework of the hand winch to the timber with a good supply of light line that we had brought along for that purpose.

There was no lead for the wire to run over, of course; it just dropped straight down between the two timbers. The Fourth Mate brought out the heavy sinker, the brass envelope and one of the chemical tubes. Carroll asked me what the tube was for. I told him.

"It goes down," I said, "with its sealed end up. As it sinks, pressure forces the water up inside it. The inside of the tube, as you see, is coated with a pink chemical. Contact with the water makes it colourless. When the sinker is brought to the surface again the length of colourless tube is measured against a special scale—and that gives the depth."

"But you have a scale on top of the winch affair," said Carroll. "That will tell you how much wire has run out."

"That may not be the same as the actual depth," I said. "For example, when the machine is being used aboard a ship her speed through the water makes the wire run out astern. "

The Fourth Mate was filling the cavity in the bottom of the sinker with tallow.

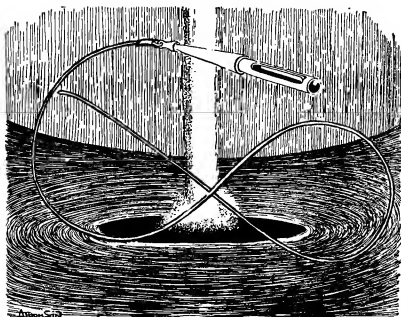
"And what's *that* for?" asked the Agent.

"To bring up a sample of the bottom. Bunyip feathers, maybe," I said, remembering the drunken fireman. "Joking apart—there may be something interesting. . "

"Rutile, perhaps," he said hopefully, then scowled as he remembered that he would lose his bet if we found bottom.

The Old Man was beginning to fuss.

"Aren't you ready yet, Mr Winston? I don't know what you young fellows are coming to, the amount of time it takes you to do a simple job!"



"Ready now, sir," I told him.

The brass envelope with the chemical tube inside had been bent on between the end of the wire and the sinker, which was already dangling in the clear, cold water. All the others, but for the Second Mate, had retreated back along the timbers to the shore. The Second had the "feeler"—a short, thin steel rod with a right angled bend at one end and a wooden handle at the other—pressed against the wire. When the brake was released and the wire running out a momentary slackening would tell him when the sinker hit bottom. I was working the brake myself, ready to slam it on as soon as the Second Mate gave the word or as soon as I saw that the wire was almost run out.

"Stand by!" I shouted.

I gave the two handles the quarter turn that released the drum. It began to turn, faster and faster, whining with the speed of its revolutions. The needle on the dial on top of the winch was sweeping smoothly. Five fathoms. . . Ten. Fifteen. Twenty-five . . . Thirty-five . . . Fifty-five . . .

"How much?" shouted the Old Man. He sounded worried.

"Seventy-five, sir!"

Suddenly the rough platform upon which we were standing, the

Second Mate and I, seemed terribly insecure. The waterhole might not be bottomless—but it was deep, too deep.

One hundred. One fifty. Two hundred. Two fifty. Two sixty.

I came back on the handles. The platform shook as the brake took hold.

"What's the idea?" asked the Second Mate. "We haven't got bottom yet."

"We're almost out of wire."

"You must have got bottom!" the Old Man was shouting. "Get the wire in! Check the sounding on the tube!"

It was the turn of the cadets to do some work. Two of them came out to the machine and manned the handles. I left them to it—it takes a long time to bring up two hundred and sixty fathoms of wire manually.

Carroll and his brother were looking happy, so was the local reporter. Captain Jevons was looking thunderous. I managed to avoid him, went to talk and smoke a cigarette with Sparks and the Third and Fourth Mates.

"You have the brightest ideas," I said to the Radio Officer. He grinned.

"At least I got you all out in the fresh air."

The Old Man, muttering something about having to do everything himself, had ventured out over the pool to the sounding machine. He was holding the boxwood scale. He urged the cadets to greater efforts, managed to get one of his own big hands on one of the handles. At last I saw the gleam of brass in the water. It was the envelope in which the chemical tube had been placed. The Second Mate bent down, caught it as it came clear of the surface. He opened it, removed the tube carefully, keeping it upright. He handed the tube to the Captain.

"What does it show, sir?" I called, seeing him place it against the scale.

"Two sixty," he replied unhappily.

He walked ashore, balancing carefully.

"You'll have to bend on the spare reel."

This was a problem—the drum of the hand winch wasn't big enough to take two reels of wire. But I'd already devoted thought to the operation.

Once again we released the brake, once again we let the wire run until it was almost off the drum. Then, pulling the slack in to

the framework of the winch, we managed to clamp it fast with a large shifting spanner from Carroll's tool kit. The remaining wire was run off and made fast to the framework with a series of hitches that I hoped would hold if the spanner slipped.

Two of the cadets, at the edge of the pool, held the spare reel between them on a short iron bar, letting it turn freely. The other two turned the handles. Not more than twenty minutes had elapsed before we were ready to bend the two ends of wire together. I realised suddenly that it was getting dark. The reporter went to his car, backed it and turned it so it was facing the pool, switched on his headlights.

Once again the Second Mate and I were alone on the platform. He was crouching down with his feeler against the wire. I had my grip on the handles.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Ready," he said.

The fast turning drum whirred. I could see the needle on the dial begin its sweep again. Ten. Twenty. Thirty. Forty. Fifty.

"No-bottom yet?" called the Old Man anxiously.

"No."

Sixty. Seventy. Eighty.

"Stop the machine!" ordered the Captain.

He came out to the centre of the pool, pushed the Second Mate to one side, almost shoving him into the water. He grasped the wire with his big hands, shook it. It showed not the slightest sign of slackness.

"All right," he told me. "Pay out some more."

Ninety. One hundred. One ten. One twenty. One thirty.

Again I stopped. Again he tested the wire.

One forty. One fifty. One sixty.

"This is impossible!" he muttered.

"You might as well admit you're licked!" called Carroll.

"Don't listen to him," the Old Man said. "Carry on!"

I released the brake again.

One seventy. One eighty. One ninety. Two hundred.

He tried to shake the wire. It gave no indication that the sinker had reached bottom.

Two ten. Two twenty. Two thirty. Two forty. Two fifty. Two sixty.

"Only ten more fathoms, sir," I reminded him.

"That's sixty feet!" he snarled. "Pay out cautiously, now!"

I paid out cautiously, slamming the brake on every two revolutions or so. I wasn't happy about it—if we lost the wire we had no more spare reels on board. And I, for one, didn't want the task of explaining to our Sydney Marine Superintendent why we found it necessary to replenish such items of deck stores out in Australia.

By slow jerks the needle crept to the two hundred and seventy mark. When it was reached there wasn't more than half a turn of wire left on the drum. The Old Man looked at it sadly.

"All right," he said to me. "Take it in."

On the bank Carroll was watching us. I could see his teeth gleaming, in spite of the darkness, as he grinned broadly. I could see the reporter bending down, holding his book in the beam of one of his headlamps, scribbling rapidly.

I called to the cadets, "Come on, two of you! Get this wire up!"

Reluctantly a pair of them came out along the timbers. It would be a long, back breaking job—five hundred and forty fathoms of wire to be wound up by hand.

The Old Man, the Second Mate and myself retreated along the timbers a little way to give the youths room to work. They bent down to the handles, strained and heaved. Nothing happened.

Captain Jevons growled something about feeble puppies and went to take a spell at the winch himself. His not inconsiderable weight added to his better than average strength made no difference. He cursed, then made sure that the pin was out and the drum free to turn. The pin *was* out. He cursed again.

He realised suddenly that he shouldn't be cursing.

"Carroll!" he shouted. "Come out here! See for yourself! The sinker's fouled something on the bottom! We can't budge it!"

"More likely your machine frozen up!" replied the Agent.

Nevertheless, he came out to the centre of the pool. He had brought a torch with him. We used this to inspect the works of the sounding machine as far as we could. Everything seemed to be in order. But even with four of us on the handles we couldn't budge the wire. One thing we did discover, however. The handles would turn in reverse, allowed us to pay out all the remaining wire on the drum.

But we couldn't get any of it back.

I engaged the pin again—although, with the wire at its very

end, it wasn't much use. All of us trooped ashore for a conference. By this time the question of who had won, and who had lost, was rather academic. A half hearted argument did develop between Carroll and the Old Man, the Agent maintaining that the wire had caught on some projection on the walls of the waterhole, the Captain swearing that the sinker had fouled something on the bottom. I pointed out that the lead was armed, and that if it had touched bottom something would be brought up in the tallow to show what it was that it had touched. The main problem was to get the wire—and with it the sinker—up to ground level.

At last I got hold of Sparks.

"This was your bright idea," I told him. "Let's have another one—and the sooner the better. I'm getting hungry, if you're not."

"I've been thinking about it," he said. "How would this be? We unleash the machine from the timbers and slide it ashore. "

"We couldn't do it. The wire's too tight. . " I was beginning to get an idea myself. "But we can lash the timbers together tightly. We can take a tow rope to them from the rear of Mr. Carroll's truck. Then—perhaps what we can't do by manpower we'll do by horsepower."

The Old Man demurred, on principle. But he couldn't think of any other way out of the impasse. The Second Mate demurred too. After all—he was the Navigator and the sounding machine was his baby. He put up a struggle but was overpowered by superior rank.

There was enough spare line in the truck for us to lash the baulks of timber together thoroughly and securely. There was a tow-line that was almost new—and it was long enough for us to use quadrupled. There was a thick plank that we could use to keep the wire from chafing on the edge of the waterhole once we got the machine clear. And I had arranged for two of us to walk on either side of the machine to stop it from toppling while it was being dragged over the ground on its rough sledge.

"Are you all ready?" shouted Carroll from the driver's cab.

"All ready!" I called. "Go ahead!"

Carroll started up, put the truck into low gear. The engine growled and protested, the wheels started to spin in the loose sandy soil. There were some sacks in the back of the utility and we got them out, put them under the rear wheels. The tyres gripped then and the truck edged forward, slowly at first and then with slightly increased speed.

Suddenly, with a startlingly loud splash, the two far ends of my baulks of timber slipped from the edge of the pool. In spite of the weight of the sounding machine they floated, barely breaking the surface of the water. The two nearer ends slid up and over the near verge of the waterhole until the entire makeshift contraption was on dry land. We put the plank under the wire then, in such a position that it would take the chafe.

His motor snarling, the towrope creaking, Carroll kept going. The crude sledge was far more stable than I thought it would be and so, fearing that the wire might snap and lash back viciously, I ordered everybody away from it. The possible toppling over of the sounding machine was the least of my worries.

The truck was a hundred yards from the pool now, and still going, although making heavy weather of it. The wire was singing with the strain. I hoped that it wouldn't snag any sharp rocks, and was relieved to see by the light of the borrowed torch that it seemed to be well clear of all obstructions.

Two hundred yards were gained, but slowly. I stationed the officers and cadets in a long line so that word of mouth orders could be passed to Carroll, making it quite clear that three short flashes on the torch—the Morse letter "S"—would mean *Stop*. And then I was running back and forward along the length of the wire, keeping a keen watch for anything that might cause a breakage and waste all our efforts.

It was a long time before the clumsy hitch joining the two ends of wire came into sight. It fouled the plank, dragging it away from the edge of the pool, and I had to order Carroll to stop. When we got the plank into position again he was starting to slip backwards, in spite of his brakes. And then we had the trouble with spinning rear wheels again, but at last he got going.

He was on the road now, and making better time—but not much better.

Then.

It was all confused. The truck leapt ahead suddenly. From the waterhole came a deafening roar, a terrifying bellowing. High and higher, glittering in the beam of the journalist's headlamps, rose a column of water and spray. We ran, all of us, stumbling on the rough ground, falling, getting to our feet again and still running.

Carroll, to give him his due, stopped. We clustered around the truck, counted noses. We looked fearfully towards the waterhole, to the wavering column still a pale, frightening pillar against the stars.

"It was the soap that did it," said Carroll shakily. "The soap on the bottom of the sinker—the 'arming' you called it."

"Rubbish!" said the Old Man, trying hard not to sound equally shaky. "It was tallow, not soap. Besides—geysers are hot water. What fell on me was icy cold."

"It's dropping," said Sparks. "It's going down."

Slowly the column of water was shortening. The roaring faded to a low, ominous grumbling, and then, at last it died. The waterhole was a waterhole once more and not a dreadful fountain playing where no fountain should ever play.

Reluctantly we started to make our way back. At first Carroll's brother and the reporter were in the lead—after all, it was their cars that had been exposed to damage.

This didn't please the Old Man. He strode ahead valiantly, saying to me, "Come on, Mr. Winston, we'll see if we can find the sinker and the rest of the wire!"

It was the brass envelope that we found first, seeing its dull gleam in the light of the torch that I was still carrying. I opened it carefully. The glass tube inside was, miraculously, undamaged. The Second Mate found the scale still in his pocket, held it against the tube. It showed three hundred and twenty fathoms.

"Bottomless pool!" growled the Captain. "Bottomless pool my foot!"

So, but not without argument, Carroll paid his ten pounds. And he still maintains that one of us, with a misplaced sense of humour, stuck the thing we found on the arming of the lead there before we lowered it.

For myself, I'm not so sure. No matter what showed on the scale, *all* the wire was out. There may have been some sort of Mobius Strip effect, some odd shifting of the dimensions. It is barely possible that the bottomless pool was a . . . a tunnel, as it were, between Twentieth Century Australia and the Arabia of millennia ago. As I have said—I don't know.

The date stone one might account for, but not the little medalion with the Seal of Solomon and the Arabic lettering. The Curator of the local museum was able to translate it for us. Its meaning, he said, could best be expressed in the three words: DO NOT DISTURB.

Dream World

*Every time he awakened, reality
ceased to be—he could prove it, too.*

Illustrated by Arthur Thomson.

Group Captain Alfred Mole was just about to receive the bar to his Victoria Cross from the Queen when a hand shook him roughly awake, and reality became an unpleasant dream world.

The white coated figure of Anson, the male nurse, was bending over him again, just as he was always bending when the nightmares began.

"Come on, Alfred," said Anson. "You've been sleeping long enough. It's time for your pills."

Mole sat up, a deep well of disappointment in his being. It had happened again, and this time he had been so sure—

"Doctor Weems will be in to see you in a minute," Anson told him as he handed over the water and the two white pills. "And don't you go upsetting things like you did last time. The Doctor doesn't like it."

Mole said nothing. Soon, he knew the dream would pass, the nightmare would be over, and he would wake up in a sane, clean world again. The ghost figure of Anson would return to the deep

shadows of his mind, and Group Captain Mole would be whole again and in clean reality. Of late, he noticed, the dreams had become more solid. The touch of things was sharp and clear, like Anson's hand as he helped him off the bed. He could remember things quite clearly from one dream to the next; he remembered his last dream of Doctor Weems, how he'd tried to convince the man that it was all a nightmare, how by argument he had tried to demolish the dream world around him.

Mole wondered why he bothered. After all, he knew that soon he would awake and everything would be in its proper place.

Doctor Weems came into the ward just as Mole swallowed his second pill. Weems was a small man, round and plump and red, with rimless glasses, a bald head, and the confidence that all small men exude to offset their lack of stature. He greeted Mole cordially but with the usual touch of condescension that sent Mole's temper rising at once. He felt like upsetting things.

"And how are we this morning, Mister Mole?" asked Weems, and as usual it was Anson who answered.

"We're a lot better, Doctor. Alfred's been no trouble at all, but we do sleep an awful lot still."

"Ah." Weems nodded knowledgeably. He picked up the chart from the foot of Mole's bed and wrote on it. "You know, Mister Mole, we really must do something about all this sleeping. We can't expect to get you well if you don't co-operate, you know!" He smiled at Alfred, a pink, round smile, the one which he reserved to instil confidence in his patients. "Now then, you get up and about. Go for walks in the grounds. Anson will show you round the gardens. They're at their best this time of year, you know. Take an interest in Spring and the flowers budding."

"Commune with nature?" Mole spoke for the first time.

"That's it. Capital." The sarcasm was lost on Weems, and Mole wondered idly why he allowed stupid people to haunt his dreams. "I'll look in again tomorrow—or better still you go out with Anson after lunch and then come and see me in my study and tell me how you enjoyed it."

Outside the ward and with the door closed, Weems face lost its professional brightness. For all his confident expectations things with Alfred Mole were not going well. He recalled the day he had first heard of the case. One of his former college friends, now in private practice, had sent the man along as a simple case of schizophrenia. Good family, plenty of money, expensive treatment, 'give me twenty per cent for my trouble, old boy'.

"How long has Mole been with us, Anson?" Weems demanded.
"Almost three months, Doctor."

Three months! Weems frowned. And the man was no better. In fact, if truth be admitted, he was getting worse. He slept most of the time, day and night, and insisted when he did wake up that he was in the middle of a nightmare and that things would be all right just as soon as he went back to sleep. Or, as he put it, woke up.

Weems didn't like failures. It was bad for business. As long as he could show partial success he was happy, because he could smile sadly and remark that the poor fellow was already too far gone when he had been called in. If only they'd sent for him sooner.

But Mole! Weems shook his head in disgust and passed on to the next private ward.

Colonel Alfred Mole squirmed on his stomach through the stinking Malayan mud. Behind him Sergeant Anson led the rest of the small company that made up the patrol deep into Communist held territory. Ahead of Mole the trees thinned into a clearing where ill clad Chinese sat or lounged in complete ignorance of their fate. This was the culminating moment in a week old forced march designed to break the central command of the rebels.

Colonel Mole drew his two revolvers, stood up, and shouted, "Charge," at the top of his bull like voice.

In seconds it was over. Twenty six rebels lay dead or wounded, and the Communist organiser for the whole of North Malaya was captured.

Colonel Mole had done it again.

The investiture was at Buckingham Palace on a Friday, and Mole was walking through the huge iron gates in full dress uniform, the envy of all eyes, when someone tapped him on the shoulder, and the white coated figure of Anson said, "I told you before, Alfred, you've got to get some fresh air. Now, you come out of it. Doctor Weems said I was to take you round the gardens this afternoon, and that's what I'm going to do."

The hot flame of rage welled in Mole's heart. The nightmare was back again, stronger and more real than ever. He shut his eyes for a moment and hoped that it would go away, but Anson shook him again and said, "No, you don't, Alfred. Come on and dress."

Anson walked him round the gardens for over an hour, chatting to him and showing him the flowers and the trees, bright and colour-



ful with the promise of spring. He introduced him to other people too, people who were surely of the stuff of dreams and of the nightmare world that was becoming too familiar to Mole. There was an old man with only one eye and a twisted, leering mouth who mumbled incoherently; a woman with an untidy dress and wild hair, who gaped vacantly when Anson spoke to her; and a young man who smiled continually and broke into hysterical giggles when anyone spoke to him.

Mole wished desperately that he could wake up in a sane world again.

After they had walked round the grounds for an hour or more, Anson took him along to Doctor Weems private study high up in the west wing of the building. Mole had only been there once before, but he remembered the dream quite well. It was one of the first he had had concerning Weems and Anson. They climbed three flights of stairs and went along a cool, white corridor with a thick carpet on the floor to muffle their footsteps. Anson opened the door which had "Doctor Weems" painted on it in black letters, and ushered Mole inside.

The room was of almost sybaritic comfort, with wide, high win-

dows draped with expensive curtains; the walls were panelled wood and thick pile rugs were spread plentifully across a wood block floor. Doctor Weems rose from behind a wide, antique desk, and beamed jovially as he saw who his visitors were.

"Ah, Mole. Did you enjoy your walk? Anson has shown you everything, I hope? Now, tell me, how do you feel?"

Mole wondered idly if Weems would vanish like a balloon if he was pricked. After all, that was what happened in dreams usually. He answered nonchalantly, "If you want me to talk to you, Weems, I will. But when I wake up you'll have to go, you know." He laughed at the beauty of the joke and Weems joined in as well.

"Just you tell me when you're going to wake up, Mole," he said winking hugely. "Then I can get out of the way. After all, I don't want to vanish with the rest of your dream."

He motioned to a chair beside the desk. "Sit down, Mole. I want to talk to you about this dreaming business."

Mole sat down. "What about it?" he enquired tolerantly.

Weems studied his white, pudgy hands. "It isn't as you think, you know, Mole. I've decided that the only way to cure you is to shock you out of the whole thing. You see, the world you think is a dream world, isn't. It's the real world—"

Mole yawned delicately. Even conversations seemed to be nightmarish in a nightmare.

"—and the world which you think is real, isn't real at all. It's a makeup in your own mind while you're asleep. Now, the first thing to do is to prove it to you, and once we've done that then your troubles will be more than half solved."

Mole wondered drowsily how long the jabber would go on. The bright sun, through the high windows shone directly into his eyes, blinding him as he looked at it. Probably Weems would talk until he woke up again. He closed his eyes to shut out the sun and tried to close his ears to the unintelligible mumble of the Doctor's voice. He wondered when he would wake up and find the whole grim reality around him once more. He'd heard it said that dreams were some form of escape mechanism, that one tried to drown the horror of reality by inventing a world in which one could lose one's self. Escape! Well, he certainly needed that—or rescue. Just how long did these secret agents think they could hold him captive anyway? No doubt they realised that time was on his side, for the longer he could hold out the greater were the chances of rescue. The human body could only stand so much, and

if help didn't arrive before long then even his iron control would break and the Terran Space Force would lose its most valuable agent. Drugs and torture would break him in the end if help was not soon in coming.

The prick of a needle in his left arm made him wince in agony. More drugs, he thought, and prayed that help would come in time. He squinted at the windows with their heavy bars. Odd, he hadn't noticed them before. He could see the clear blue sky out of which help and rescue would come—perhaps too late.

Space Marshal Mole smiled grimly. "You tried drugs before," he reminded them.

Weems nodded and smiled. "Yes, but this is something different. It is much in the nature of an experiment, but I've had good results with other patients not quite as—as bad as you. Its purpose is to shock you out of this fantasy world and to impress upon your subconsciousness the nature of reality. It makes the mind receptive to new ideas, and the idea I'm going to impress upon you is that you are living in a real world." He smiled confidently. "Now, that's easy isn't it?"

"It sounds like hypnotism!"

"Well, in a way it is. Though that's too simple an answer really."

"Nonsense," boomed Space Marshal Mole's stentorian voice. "You can't trick me with such ridiculous ideas. This is the real world, here, now—"

"Well, of course it is—"

"You can't trick me into talking by telling me I'm dreaming—"

"Eh?"

"—it won't work. You've not much time left, you know, Weems, or whatever your name is. Help will reach me soon."

High in the sky, above the fleecy clouds, he could see dark specks, fast moving. The muted hum of great engines reached his ears, and his lips curled disdainfully. He knew that he had beaten them.

"The Terran Fleet has found me, Weems. You're too late. In a few moments it will all be over."

Weems was frowning in puzzlement. He expected some reaction to the drug, but the ranting ramblings of Mole alarmed him slightly for the reaction promised to be more violent than he had ever thought possible. He looked at Anson standing quietly near the door.

"Has he ever carried on like this before, Anson?"

The male nurse shook his head. "No Doctor, this is a new one. Perhaps the drug—?"

"Er, yes. Quite, quite," said Weems hastily. "Well, now."

Outside the window the roar of engines filled the air and a song of victory filled Mole's heart, though even in his moment of triumph he had to admit that Weems retained his composure remarkably well.

"Well, now," said Weems again. "What's this latest dream of yours, Mole?"

"Dream!" Mole laughed, a resonant, confident sound. "Oh, no, it won't work, Weems. I know you for what you are. You thought that I'd be fooled by this facade of yours, that I'd give away all the secrets that I know." He rose and laughed again, stretching his lean, hard body to its full six feet three. "It was pretty good at that, Weems, I must admit you nearly had me fooled more than once."

Weems was looking worried and puzzled. "The drug should have had some effect by now, Anson."

"Perhaps it has," replied the male nurse anxiously. "I don't like the way he's acting up."

"I'm too strong for it," shouted Mole in triumph. "I'm awake now, and all your drugs have failed you."

"What's he talking about, Anson?"

"Shall I get a jacket, Doctor—?"

"The Martian invasion of Earth will never take place."

There was a dead silence as Weems blinked owlishly at Mole and Anson stood uncertain what to do. It was broken by the sound of running feet and shouting voices out in the corridor, and the door was flung open as four men burst into the room with smoking ray guns held at the ready. Mole recognised the leader as his faithful henchman, Storm.

Weems face was blank with sheer, utter astonishment. "What's going on?" he asked vaguely. "Anson, who are these men?"

"Seize them," ordered Mole. "They are Martians."

The other three men instantly covered Anson and Weems with their guns and Storm crossed the room towards his leader.

"Are you safe, sir?" he asked.

Mole smiled and nodded tiredly. "Of course. It was a little rough, but I think I've foiled their plans."

"There'll be a citation and a medal from the President of the World Federation."

"Trifles," said Mole. "I have only done my duty."

He became aware that Anson was screaming, a high, horrid noise that only partly blotted out the moaning cackle of Weems. The two of them cowered together in one corner of the room a shocking picture of terror and bewilderment.

Mole pointed to them. "These are Martians," he said sternly. "By the authority invested in me as a Marshal of Earth, and by summary court martial, I sentence you to death by shooting. Long live the Terran Empire. Take them away and execute them."

Storm motioned abruptly to the three soldiers and they dragged the two grovelling, shrieking men from the room.

"Do you know, Storm," Space Marshal Mole smiled thinly. "They tried to convince me that I was dreaming. That this world wasn't the real world, and that when I woke up that would be the real world. It was all very confusing."

Their laughter was interrupted by the blasting crack of ray guns as the sentence was carried out.

LAN WRIGHT

NEBULA No. 22 . . .

Have you ever wondered just how many people would be necessary, even given the know-how, to build any advanced product of civilization . . . a *spaceship* for example ?

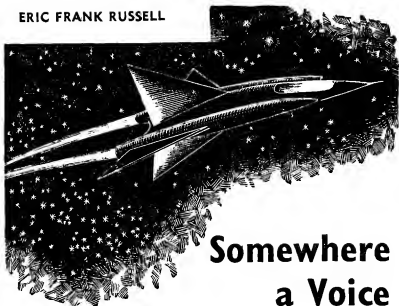
The difficulties presented by this limiting number and how they are overcome, form the background to a new tale by E. R. JAMES, specially written for NEBULA No. 22.—Out next month.

Other stories in this issue include a very unusual time story by new-author STUART ALLEN, plus other yarns by WILLIAM F. TEMPLE, H. PHILIP STRATFORD, BERTRAM CHANDLER and PETER J. RIDLEY.

Order your copy now to avoid disappointment, as demand for this number promises to be very heavy.



56 — Harry Turner



Somewhere a Voice

Nine had escaped the fate which had overcome hundreds . . . was this destined to be a reprieve or merely a postponement of tragedy?

Illustrated by Harry Turner.

They crawled, walked, tottered or jumped out of the battered little lifeboat, each according to his or her mental or physical condition. There were nine of them. The lifeboat was designed to hold twenty but only nine emerged from it and only two remained within it. Those two were dead.

All around towered the tangled jungle of a world notoriously hostile to their kind. High above burned the intense blue furnace of a sun that lent their faces a ghastly glow and made them peer through lids narrowed to the minimum. The air was thick, cloying, full of vegetable smells and vaguely reptilian but unidentifiable odours. The jungle brooded in complete silence, waiting, waiting, waiting.

First Officer Alex Symes automatically took charge. Nobody disputed his right to do so. Tall, gray-haired, laconic, he was the senior-ranking member of the party. Not that rank counted for anything in these dire circumstances; or if it did it wouldn't be for

long. A corpse has no promotional status.

Facing the others, he informed, "Near as I can make out, this is Valmia, sixth planet of ZM17." He threw a brief, narrow-eyed glance at the fiery orb above them. "Don't take it we're lucky because we aren't. There are a million far better places in the cosmos."

"We're alive," put in Max Kessler, captain of the third watch. "That's something."

"The problem is to stay alive," countered Symes, "and that is something else." His gaze went over them, studying, estimating. "Valmia has a rescue-station under an airtight dome on the fortieth parallel. Our only hopes lie in reaching it in good time." He waited a bit for that to sink in, added. "I reckon we've between seventeen hundred and two thousand miles to go."

"We should be able to travel faster here than on Earth," said Kessler. "Suppose we do forty miles a day. Fifty days—and we've made it."

"Tvority milers!" echoed Mrs. Mihailovik, her broad, pudgy face suffused with dismay. She felt for and grasped her husband's hand. "Grigor, ve nod able are to do tvority milers."

The dumpy and equally pudden-faced Grigor patted her thick, work-worn fingers. "Is best for to wait und tsee."

Watching the pair of them, Bill Mallet decided that fate could and should have arranged things much better. Salvation seemed to function on too haphazard a basis to leave room for common justice. A lot of *real* people had gone under for keeps when that superfast lump of rock smacked the *Star Queen* and split her open from end to end. Ainsworth, Alcock, Banks, Barmer, Blundell, Casartelli, Casey, Corrigan, a regiment of them, all one hundred per cent people.

And look at the useless rabble that had got away with whole skins. Only three of them were worth the lick of an earth-cow. Four if you counted Feeny, the late Captain Ridgway's Irish terrier. As deputy engineer of the first watch and two hundred pounds of lavishly tattooed muscle to boot, he, Bill Mallet, had some call to be picked for survival by whoever or whatever did the picking. The same applied to Symes and Kessler, both good men and true, skilled, white and literate.

As for the rest, well, there were infinitely more deserving cases now floating bloated and lifeless in space. These Mihailoviks, for instance. Emigrating from some village of mud hovels to which they'd been no ornaments. Squat, myopic and stupid.

Elderly, ugly and devoid of visible merit. Not able even to speak plain English.

On the first day out he'd passed Mrs. Mihailovik in a corridor just as a sudden, raucous sound startled her. She had clutched his arm and demanded in panic, "Vot ist dot?"

"Dot," he had informed with contempt she was too dim-witted to detect, "ist der vater pvumps vich pvump der vater."

"Ah, tso?" she'd said, idiotically relieved. "Mine t'anks!"

"Tsink of it nozzings," he had snorted.

A choice pair to be snatched from the very maw of death and granted life, denied to others. Creation would never have missed them. And now they'd be a serious handicap on the long march, an unwanted liability, whereas any two of the doomed crew would have been an asset. Destiny had a mighty poor notion of the proper way in which to arrange things.

Another survivor was Hannibal Paton, a lanky, soft-voiced negro, former engine-room hand of the third watch. The only darkie aboard the vessel. He'd escaped while better men had been swept clean out of the scheme of things. It didn't seem right somehow.

One could feel the same way about the yellow-faced monkey known as Little Koo. A spindly, undersized creature who once had performed some kind of lowly, unskilled task in the officers' mess. A slit-eyed, toothy, apologetic specimen who spoke only when spoken to. Quiet and secretive. Nobody knew his real name. Probably Kwok Sing, or something like that, but the ship's company had never called him anything save Little Koo.

Lastly there was Sammy Finestone, young, swarthy, black-haired, flashily dressed. A passenger from Earth and said to be a petty trader in rare crystals. A typical Hebrew in Bill Mallet's estimation. One that had never soiled his hands with honest work. Doubtless Sammy had been first into the lifeboat when the big bang came, grabbing the safest seat and clutching his bag of diamonds with an eager, clawlike grip that would remain until death did them part.

Veritably a motley mob characteristic of those who crawl like lice over every space-going vessel bound for better parts. One learns to waste no time upon them, to avoid them, steer clear of them—unless compelled by disaster to consort with them cheek by jowl.

Symes was still talking. "All I know about Valmia consists of odd bits within my memory. The total doesn't amount to much. We've no reference books, nothing else to go upon." He glanced

around with slight hopefulness. "Is there anyone else who happens to be particularly well-informed about this planet?"

They remained glumly silent excepting Bill Mallet, who grunted, "I'd never so much as heard of the place until now."

"All right." Frowning to himself, Symes went on, "The most I remember is that it's got a rescue-station as I mentioned before. Also that the planet has never been assigned for human settlement. That means it must be unsuitable."

"Do you recall the reasons?" asked Kessler.

"Unfortunately I don't. They're the usual ones, I suppose: unfriendly lifeforms, inadequate or dangerous food resources, an atmosphere that kills either quickly or slowly, or maybe a sun that does the same."

"You can't say whether it's just one of these features or the whole lot?"

"No, I can't," admitted Symes, lugubriously. "But one thing speaks for itself: the rescue-station is under a dome. They don't go to all the trouble and expense of creating livable conditions within a great shield unless they're definitely unlivable outside of it."

"So what you're trying to tell us," said Kessler, meeting him eye to eye, "is that our time is limited?"

"Yes."

"To what? To how many days or weeks?"

"That is anybody's guess." His forehead was deeply corrugated as he strove to bring back cogent facts from the far days of space-schooling. "I have a faint idea that something is wrong with the atmosphere but I can't swear to it. When you've been stuffed with information on ten thousand planets, most of which you never expect to see, you tend to forget nine-tenths of it. A man's mind can hold only so much."

"The air tastes all right to me," commented Mallet, drawing a deep breath. "Bit thick and stuffy but that's nothing to worry about."

"You can't judge by how it feels or smells," Symes told him. "It might take six months to kill you. Or less."

"Then the sooner we get out of this the better," said Sammy Finestone, fidgeting.

"That goes for everyone," retorted Mallet, giving him a hard stare. "Not just for you!"

"He said *ve*, nod *I*," Mrs. Mihailovik chipped in.

"Tso vat?" growled Mallet, switching the stare to her direction.

"Shut up, all of you," ordered Symes, displaying some irritation.

"There'll be time enough to squabble when we get somewhere safe. Until then we have better use for our energies." He gestured toward the useless lifeboat. "First, we'll bring out Murdoch and Flaherty and give them decent burial."

They were silent. Max Kessler and Hannibal Paton went into the boat, reappeared with the bodies, laid them side by side on a carpet of purple moss. When Kessler had snatched them into the airlock five seconds before the lifeboat blew free, Murdoch and Flaherty had already been beyond resuscitation. They were half-cold before the rocket-tubes were properly hot. Now they lay flaccidly on the moss while the blue sun scowled down and gave their dead faces a horrid tinge of green.

A few emergency tools were racked in the boat and included one spade. Taking turns with this they dug two graves in red-coloured soil that smelled like old iron far gone in rust. They composed the bodies in their last resting-places while Little Koo looked on expressionlessly and Mrs. Mihailovik snivelled into a grimy rag that served as handkerchief.

With glossy-peaked cap held in one hand, Symes looked at the alien sky and said, "Flaherty was a Roman Catholic. He died without a priest. You won't hold that against him, will you, God? He had no choice about the matter."

He stopped, embarrassed by Mrs. Mihailovik's loud and uncontrolled sobbing, but still kept his gaze fixed upon the vault above.

"As for Murdoch's faith, we don't know what it was. He was a hard-swearer but it never meant anything. He was a good man, the same as Flaherty. They were both fine, decent men. Please God forgive them any little sins you may have recorded against them and grant them the last, peaceful haven of honest sailors."

Mr. Mihailovik was comforting his wife, patting her wrist and saying, "There, Momma—there, there!"

After a short pause, Symes said, "Amen!" and put on his cap.

"Amen!" murmured the others.

"Amen!" lisped Little Koo with the air of one only too willing to do that which is proper.

Feeny sniffed around the graves, went in turn to each of the silent watchers and emitted a querulous whine.

The lifeboat's armament was hopelessly inadequate. Nobody could be saddled with the blame for that. The tiny vessel had been undergoing its weekly check-up at the moment of disaster

and most of its normal contents had been lying outside in the corridor when the *Star Queen* flew apart. Even its fuel-tanks had not received compensation for their loss by evaporation.

Feeny and Paton had been actually inside the boat. Seven others still surviving in a shapeless lump that was one-third of the *Star Queen's* tail-end had staggered to it with sealed lips, pinched noses and starting eyes. Two more had been dragged in, the pair now buried. And they'd blown free with what little they'd got.

No face-masks. No oxygen-cylinders. No portable ray-projectors. One pocket-compass and that with its face cracked. A radio that didn't work because of a defect that Thomason might have cured in two minutes had he not been among the swollen floaters in space. Three automatic pistols, a box of ammunition, a large quantity of iron rations and a few metal implements. Half a dozen razor-edged machetes. Nothing more.

Already wearing a belt holding one of the automatics, Symes said, "I'll stick to this weapon and take the compass. We'll march in single file with me in the lead." His attention shifted to Kessler. "If we walk into any serious trouble I'll be the first to catch it. I may not get out of it alive. In that event you had better take over the lead." He tossed an automatic across. "So you hang on to this one and, in the meantime, keep to the tail of the line and function as our rearguard."

He studied the others, trying to decide who should have the third weapon. Mallet needed it the least, being of exceptionally powerful build and fully capable of making redoubtable use of a machete. The same applied to Paton whose black body was well-muscled. As for the Mihailoviks, chances were twenty to one they wouldn't be capable of aiming it straight or hitting a haystack at twenty yards. Feeny couldn't use it even if he were willing to.

That left Sammy Finestone and Little Koo. The latter was much the smaller of the two, moreover as a member of the *Star Queen's* crew he must have had at least rudimentary training in the handling of firearms. He should know which way to point the thing when he pulled the trigger. So he gave it to Little Koo.

"The rest of you take these broadswords," he ordered, indicating the machetes. "Divide the iron rations, each as much as he can carry. Fill your water-bottles and we'll get started."

They did as instructed, humping their respective loads, glancing uneasily at the brooding jungle and feeling a strange reluctance to leave the little ship. For most of a dreadful week the small metal cylinder had been home, a man-made sanctuary from the cosmos

that so suddenly had raged against them. It seemed sheer ingratitude to abandon it now and leave it to the creeping growths that soon would cover it and hasten its corrosion.

Aware of this sentiment because he shared some of it himself, Symes told them, "If we make it to the rescue-station they'll send out a copter with a load of rocket-fuel and bring this boat back. It's too valuable to be left to rot."

That soothed them slightly. They started out, heading northward and following a yard-wide path made by nobody knew what. Symes marched at the head, automatic in hand. Next came Hannibal Paton and Feeny. Then Little Koo, the Mihailoviks, Sammy Finestone, Bill Mallet and Max Kessler.

The jungle closed around, a riot of colours in which a dark, almost black green predominated. The blue sun became shielded by overhead growths but still drove its searing rays through rare gaps, its brilliant shafts here and there seeming to spotlight unimaginable things lying in wait amid the tangle.

They covered a mile, stumbling over roots and creepers, twisting corners, occasionally hacking at ropey things straggling across the route. Some of the slashed vines writhed away with horrid life, like mutilated worms. The line stopped and Symes called back.

"Watch this orchid-covered thing—it just took a bite at me."

Hesitantly they shuffled on. The path took a sharp turn and on the corner stood a huge growth bearing great crimson-trumpeted flowers. Mallet could see Mrs. Mihailovik edging nervously around it, as far from it as she could get, her eyes wide with apprehension, her steel-rimmed spectacles halfway down her nose. Her husband was urging her on though no less wary himself.

"Is not-by now, Momma. Nod worry. You is got by."

"Am trobble vor you, Grigor. Make hurry!"

Grigor edged round in exactly the same way, watching the plant every moment, trying to maintain as much distance as possible without putting himself nearer some other unknown danger behind. He made it, joined her, pushed on. Sammy Finestone made cautious approach to the corner, reached it, shot around it in one mad dash.

Sniffing his disdain, Bill Mallet marched brawnily along the path, his machete poised in readiness. He could see some of the crimson trumpets straining toward the path, pulling at their stalks in their eagerness to get within reach. One lay upon the ground, decapitated by Paton's knife just as it had stabbed at Symes. He

came abreast, posed temptingly.

A trumpet immediately lunged at him. He got a brief fragmentary glimpse of an enormous crimson maw armed with a thousand slender needles, then his gleaming machete struck it from its thick, elastic stem. The thing let out an eerie gasp as it fell.

Behind him, Kessler said, "I wouldn't have bothered."

"Why not? I'm using no ammo."

"You're using strength and nervous tension."

"What of it?"

"Maybe you'll need all you've got before you're through."

"Tell that to Sammy. Notice the windy way he scuttled around it? Like a frightened hare!" He let go a harsh laugh, chopped savagely at a piece of vine which coiled and coiled again. "Sammy's only worry is Mrs. Finestone's little boy—and his sack of diamonds."

"Has he got a sack of diamonds?" asked Kessler in open surprise.

"Ever know of a Hebe who hadn't?"

"Sh-h-h! He'll hear you."

"As if I care," scoffed Mallet. He speeded his pace and caught up with the subject of conversation. Sammy was waiting at the next turn of the trail, his dark eyes anxious.

"For a moment I thought something had happened."

"Did you really?" grinned Mallet. "Fat lot you did about it."

"I was about to go back for you when I heard your voices coming."

"Did your ears burn?"

"No." Sammy eyed him in puzzlement. "Should they have done?"

"You bet. We were enjoying the way you'd cornered on two wheels past that—"

From somewhere well ahead came Symes' voice. "What's the hold-up back there?"

"Coming!" yelled Kessler.

They moved on in silence.

Death came at night when the sun had given way to three midget moons one of which dragged a hazy wisp behind it like a pale spectre prowling in thin drapes. The stars were distorted and sickly in a sky that refused to be black and insisted on retaining slight traces of the great furnace below the horizon.

The nine had built a fire within a small clearing. Seven sat

tiredly around it while two remained on their feet and kept constant watch over vaguely visible surroundings. Feeny tried in vain to sleep, first resting head on paws and blinking at the flames, dozing for less than a minute then perking upright, eyes alert, ears twitching. His obvious restlessness communicated itself to the others.

A grim moodiness lay over them too. The general estimate of the day's progress made it somewhere between eight and ten miles. Allowing for the constant zig-zagging of the path their real gain northward could not be more than five or six miles. At that dismal rate it would take them most of an Earth-year to reach the fortieth parallel—if they lived that long.

Neither could they trust to hit squarely upon the rescue-station's location with the aid of a pocket-compass and one man's memory. There might well be a considerable mileage to cover along the parallel itself, assuming that they'd know when they'd reached it.

If only the lifeboat had held just a little more fuel, say enough for one circumnavigation of the planet. If only the radio had still operated on landing so that it could send out its constant *M'aidez* until the rescue-station picked it up and got a true bearing on it. If only Thomason or one of the junior radio-operators had been among the survivors, able to repair the apparatus and thus save them all in short order.

It was a long and miserable list of "ifs." In stories are infinitely resourceful supermen who know everything about everything. In real life it isn't like that. The expert engineer knows little or nothing about space-navigation; the trained navigational officer knows little or nothing about radio. Each must do the best with what he has got. He cannot do more.

But what had Hannibal Paton got other than a big fat mouth to eat into the precious rations? What had the Mihailoviks got other than tired souls and weary legs to slow down all the rest? What had Samuel Finestone, Esquire, got? Or little Koo? Not even a fragment of knowledge useful in finding a way out the trap. Nothing but willingness to be nurse-maided into salvation—if it could be done.

Bill Mallet was lying on his side stewing these bitter thoughts and futilely inviting slumber that refused to come. Lit up by flames, he could see the half-naked dancing girl tattooed on his hairy forearm. He twitched his muscles a few times to make her wiggle. Close by his outstretched fingers lay his machete, silvery and shining.

On his right two small red spheres lit up every now and again as Feeny opened and closed his eyes. Immediately across the fire he could see the Mihailoviks clumsily sprawled together, eyes closed, mouths open, holding hands. But for the continual crackle and splutter of the fire he might have been able to hear their animal snores. Dull pigs they were, he thought, waddling along with the rest in hope of eventually arriving at the trough.

Kessler sneaked quietly out of the half-dark, laid more brushwood and rotten logs on the flames. The fire spurted strongly, a column of sparks shot upward. He went back to keep watch in the shadows. Time crawled on while two of the moons sank low and the third dragged its veil more sluggishly across the zenith.

Something made sibilant rustling noises deep in the massed vegetation. A faint but pungent odour oozed out of the jungle, strengthening slightly as gradually the almost unheard sounds drew nearer. The smell was somewhat like that of goats sweating on a summer's day. The sounds reached from near to far away, as if the thing that caused them had immense length.

Silence awhile except for the spitting and snapping of the fire and several uneasy whines from Feeny. Non-visual senses reached surreptitiously out of the gloom, surveyed the clearing, studied the fire, the sleepers, the watchers. It reached a decision.

Came a fierce forward lunge, a brittle breaking of branches and all hell broke loose. There was a loud yell from Kessler followed by the sharp, hard crack of his automatic. Feeny bolted toward the source of the uproar, tail back, teeth bared. Trees swayed and bushes whipped sideways from the edge of the clearing to a point three hundred yards within the jungle.

It was not until he found himself standing dazedly on his feet, machete in sweating hand, that Mallet realised he must have succeeded in going to sleep. He could remember waking up with a violent start as someone bawled the alarm and fired a shot in the night. An instant later a big black body had hurtled over him, bush-knife in fist. That had been Paton going into action.

He jumped the same way himself, toward the fracas in the jungle, without looking to see what anyone else was doing. The gun exploded again and again, making thin spears of orange flame between the trees. A strange coughing noise came out of the undergrowth and the cough rumbled weirdly into the distance.

Then like one in a nightmare Mallet became aware of Symes standing beside him holding a torch of blazing twigs. In the flicker-

ing light they could see monster coils four feet thick sliding back into darkness. They moved with dreadful sinuosity, hauling a great eyeless head evil beyond measure. Streams of milk-white goo were flowing from deep gashes across the blind face and huge neck.

A few paces in front of them was Kessler, cursing as he stooped over the limp, silent form of Hannibal Paton. He picked up the body, grunting under its weight, brought it back to the fireside. Symes bent down and examined it.

"That horror snatched at me," said Kessler, breathing heavily. "It appeared without warning, as if it had merely materialised out of thin air. I let go a shout and fired into its ugly head as it started to lug me away."

"Yes, yes," said Symes, tending to Paton.

"Hanny jumped the fire and everyone else. He went for it as if he'd gone clean crazy and started trying hack its head off. It dropped me, belted him flat and backed out fast. I gave it two more shots without any effect that I could see." He mopped his forehead and fresh sweat promptly beaded out. "If Hanny hadn't tackled it like a maniac I'd now be a mile away and fifty yards down its guts."

Mrs. Mihailovik started bandaging an ugly gash in Paton's right arm. Where she had found the wrapping was a mystery. It wasn't from the first-aid pack. Probably a strip torn from her underdress. She rocked to and fro and crooned over the black figure as she performed her self-appointed task.

Nudging her gently, Symes said, "I'm terribly sorry, Ma'am, but you're wasting your time. He is dead."

She came up slowly, looking first at him, then at the body. The thick-lensed glasses magnified the incredulity in her eyes. Then the tears welled up. She tried to stop herself but couldn't. She took off the glasses and made pathetic attempts to stem the flow while her squat, ungainly body trembled.

Taking her arm, Symes led her back to her place by the fire. Mallet stood watching them, watched until he became conscious of Kessler studying him in turn.

"Lucky escape, eh?" said Mallet, awkwardly.

"You call it luck?" Finding the spade, Kessler dug a hole beneath a fragrant tree.

They searched Hannibal Paton for identities of his next of kin, then laid him reverently to rest. Kessler cut a wooden cross and fixed it over the grave. Symes asked the sky to accept another of its own children.

Bill Mallet said, "Amen! "
Little Koo dutifully echoed it.
So did the others.
Mrs. Mihailovik wept again.

Next day the path wandered westward. They turned into another track that ran more to the north. It widened slightly and they made better time along it. Quietened by tragedy they kept closer together and marched in the same order as before except that Feeny had now attached himself to Symes.

The route rose considerably, the jungle remained as thick and menacing as ever but had a smaller proportion of spreading trees. Overhead gaps were wider, more frequent, letting the blue sun burn through to scald them in passing. Perspiration made their hair lank, dampened their spines. Atmosphere became stuffier than ever, seeming to thicken with altitude instead of thinning as it should have done.

Shortly before mid-day Mrs. Mihailovik gave up. She seated herself on a fallen tree-trunk, her spectacles dimmed with moisture, her expression completely resigned.

"Mine feet."

"Vot of them, Momma?" inquired Grigor with great concern.

"Is done. Mine feet is done." Slipping her shoes off she sighed deeply. "No more can go."

Kessler caught up from the rear and Symes came back from the lead. The whole group clustered around.

"What's the matter?"

"Says her dogs have packed in," explained Mallet.

"We'll rest a bit." Symes carefully concealed his worry over this delay. "Maybe we'll get along better with more frequent stops."

"Is mooch better vizoud me," remarked Mrs. Mihailovik in the manner of one making an incontrovertible point. "You go on."

"What, and leave you here by yourself?"

"Nod by herself," denied Grigor, taking a seat beside her. "I also stay."

Symes said morbidly, "You'd be waiting for certain death."

"Togedder," topped Grigor, as if that were all he asked of life.

She took his hand, fondled it with thick fingers and pleaded, "Stay nod for me, Grigor. Is silly. You go on."

"I stay." He settled himself more firmly.

"We'll all stay," decided Symes, brooking no argument. He glanced at his watch. "We'll see how we feel in another hour's time. Meanwhile we can have something to eat." His gaze wandered slowly over the group, settled on Bill Mallet. After a short while, he snapped, "Well, what's eating you? Out with it, man! Don't stand there tottering on the verge!"

Mallet fidgeted uncomfortably as several pairs of eyes regarded him with expectation. "I. I—"

With unconcealed impatience, Symes said, "Look, Bill, if you've anything useful to say then for God's sake say it. If you haven't then keep your trap shut."

More embarrassed than ever, Mallet blurted out, "Back in the old gymnasium days I was considered a competent masseur."

"So —?"

Carefully avoiding Mrs. Mihailovik's gaze, he said in a rush, "I can do things with beaten-up feet."

"You can?" Symes features took on relief and new hope. "By heavens, that's useful. Think you can help Mrs. Mihailovik?"

"I could try," said Mallet, "if she'll let me." His tones showed he doubted her willingness.

"Of course she will," Symes declared. He looked at her. "Won't you?"

"Won't you, Momma?" urged Grigor.

"Is too mooch trouble for me," she protested.

"It's more trouble to squat aimlessly around when we could be getting someplace," Symes pointed out. "See what you can do for her, Bill."

"I want some luke warm water for a start," said Mallet. "Guess we'll —"

Sammy Finestone chipped in. "We passed a stream four hundred yards back." He pawed among the unloaded packs, found a canvas bucket. "I'll get some."

"Not by yourself you won't," contradicted Symes, displaying sudden sharpness. "A bucket of water isn't worth another life and you can't do much to defend yourself with a machete. You need a gun." He switched to Kessler. "You go with him, Max, just in case."

They departed, came back in short time with a gallon of water, brought up its temperature by letting it stand awhile in the full rays of the sun. Mrs. Mihailovik then soaked her swollen feet for a quarter of an hour.

After that she dried them self-consciously, let Mallet grip a foot

between his knees as if she were a horse about to be shod. Flexing his fingers, he got to work, expertly thumbing muscles and ligaments. It took quite a time before he was satisfied and dealt similarly with the other one.

"Who's got the first-aid kit?"

"Me." Sammy handed it over.

Unzipping its waterproof casing, Mallet scabbled among packets, wrappers, cans and sealed bottles, found some ether, swiftly swabbed a little of it over both feet.

"Ach!" She sucked in a quick breath. "Is colt—like ice."

"Evaporation," he said, curtly.

Opening a can of petroleum jelly, he took her heavy-soled shoes, rubbed the stuff well in, vigorously beat the soaked leather with a smooth club of wood, rubbed in more jelly, flexed and again flexed the footwear until he could easily bend toe to heel. He handed the shoes to her.

"Try 'em on now and don't tie them tightly. Let them fit a bit loose."

Doing as instructed, she stood up, took a few experimental steps. Her eyes beamed with surprised delight and for the first time Mallet noticed that they were a clear, china blue like those of a doll.

"Is *beau-ti-ful*!" she informed. More steps, taken with childish pleasure as if she'd miraculously acquired new feet. "Mine t'anks!"

"Mine also," said Grigor, vastly relieved and showing it.

"Heck," said Mallet, "it's nothing much."

A few days back he'd have sneered, "Tsink of it nozzings." Somehow he couldn't do that now. It didn't seem right. There was that pathetic gratitude showing in Grigor's eyes. And there were various meaningful phrases running round and round within his own mind.

"If Hanny hadn't tackled it. You call it luck?"

"A bucket of water isn't worth another life."

"Is mooch better vizoud me."

"I also stay."

Yes, they'd been willing to stay, alone in the jungle but together, awaiting the bitter end.

Education!

Day number four, five, six, seven. Total distance covered not known. Northward progress guessed-at as somewhere about fifty

miles. They'd now been going for a week but it seemed like a month, more than a month. The lifeboat might as well be on another planet. The sleeping-places of Murdoch and Flaherty and Hannibal Paton were mistily pictured mounds set in places unreachably afar.

And with the dawn Symes urged them to an early start mercifully unaware that his own turn came next. Again he switched to a side-path which the compass determined as more suitable than the one they'd been following. Moving at fair pace they tried to cover maximum ground before the sun could reach its zenith and burn them anew.

During the mid-day meal Little Koo paused in his eating, moved out from under the shade of their tree, tried to stare into the unbearably brilliant sky. At the same time Feeny perked his ears and whined excitedly.

"Anything wrong?" asked Symes, taking a grip on his automatic.

"Hear tiny sound high up." Coming back to the tree, Little Koo sat down and impassively got on with his meal. "Think I hear him before. Day or two ago. Not sure."

"A sound high up? What kind of a sound?"

"*Whuyoum, whuyoum, whuyoum*," Little Koo demonstrated.

"Eh? Do it again."

"*Whuyoum, whuyoum*," he obliged.

"I've not noticed it," Symes said.

"Me, neither," Kessler put in. "He must have sharper ears than the rest of us."

"Ears plenty sharp," assured Little Koo.

Mallet went out, had a look upward through shading fingers. "Sounded to me as if he was trying to imitate a helicopter."

"That's what I thought." Joining him, Symes searched as much of the sky as his eyes could endure to look at.

"Don't tell me we're developing hallucinations," jibed Kessler. "Why should a copter be scouting around? The rescue-station picked up no emergency signals from us. We just weren't able to make any."

"Do you suppose that Thomason did manage to put out a call from the *Star Queen* before his transmitter spread itself seventeen different ways?" asked Mallet.

"Not a chance," denied Kessler. "That rock hit without one-tenth of a second's warning."

"I don't think it was a copter," decided Symes, returning to

his meal.

"Neither do I."

"Hear sound," insisted Little Koo. "*Whuyoum, whuyoum.*"

They let the subject drop. The sound did not come again. Bill Mallet gave Mrs. Mihailovik's feet another spell of treatment that by this time had become a daily ritual. Sammy was always ready with the water, jelly, ether. Grigor always rewarded Mallet with his eyes. Mrs. Mihailovik's reaction never varied.

"*Beau-ti-ful! Mine t'anks!*"

In the late afternoon the trudging, sweating line suddenly and unexpectedly halted at a point where surrounding growths were abnormally thick and tangled. Up front Feeny was barking his head off. Symes and the dog were temporarily out of sight around a sharp bend with Little Koo halted on the corner.

"What goes, Alex?" shouted Kessler from the rear.

Symes' voice came back, doubtful and wary. "Feeny's acting up. Dancing around in front of me." He stopped, added in higher tones, "Lay off, you Irish idiot—you'll tear my pants apart."

"Take it easy, Alex. That dog is no dope."

"I know. But I can't make out what's exciting him."

"Nothing visible ahead?"

"Not a thing. I can see a hundred yards to the next bend."

"We can't go back," said Kessler. "We've got to go on. You stay where you are. We'll bunch up to you and meet it in a lump—whatever it is."

"That's no use," Symes' voice came back. "There isn't room on the path for more than one at a time. I've got to cope with this myself."

"Perhaps it's gone," suggested Kessler, hopefully. "Feeny's quiet now."

A wild flurry of agitated barks promptly contradicted him.

Symes said with hearable grimness, "I tried to step forward and that was the result."

"Nod like," announced Mrs. Mihailovik, displaying considerable apprehension. "Is better for to—"

She shut up as Symes again spoke, this time addressing Little Koo. "You stay put and keep me covered. I'm stepping out whether Feeny likes it or not."

A moment later Feeny yapped with utter frenzy and finished with a spine-tingling howl of canine woe. At the same time the others heard a strange breaking sound and a short, muffled exclamation from Symes. Then all was silent except for Feeny's whimpers.

Gun in hand, Little Koo glanced back blank-faced from the corner, said, "Fallen down hole."

Handing Sammy his automatic, Kessler rasped, "Stay here and keep watch behind."

He pushed past the others, Bill Mallet following, rounded the corner. Four or five yards farther on a yawning black hole extended the full width of the path. Feeny was stalking warily around the edge of it, emitting a curious mixture of moans and growls. His eyes were red-rimmed and his ruff stood up.

Dropping his machete, Bill Mallet lay on his belly, edged carefully toward the broken rim. "Hold on to my legs, will you?"

He inched farther, reached the edge some of which crumbled under the pressure of his arms. Looking down, he could see nothing but stygian darkness.

"Alex!"

No reply.

"ALEX!"

Silence.

Louder still, "Alex, are you all right?"

Nothing but a faint, indefinable clattering sound coming from a long, long way down. Feeling sidewise, he found a pebble, dropped it into the hole, counted ten before he heard it land. The stone's clunk was immediately followed by more clattering, scuttling noises from below. It made him think of something huge and chitinous. A colossal crab.

"Maybe he knocked himself out," ventured Kessler, two yards back and clinging to Mallet's boots.

"Afraid it's worse than that."

"Dead?"

"I hope so."

Scowling disapproval, Kessler said angrily, "What d'you mean, you hope so?"

"This hole goes deep. It's been specially made. It's a trap. There's something monstrous waiting at the bottom."

Kessler found himself sweating heavily. "You sure of that?"

"I can hear it moving around."

"I hear him, too," confirmed Little Koo, his flat yellow features expressionless. "Go clatty-clat."

Hauling on the boots, Kessler drew the other back. Mallet stood up, dusted himself.

"We need a very long coil of rope to get down there."

Flattening himself on the path, Kessler said, "You hold me."

He crept cautiously forward, got over the gap, bawled, "Alex! Alex! "

There was no answer from the ghastly depths. Only slight noises of armoured movement. Kessler edged backward, regained his feet, mopped his strained face. He was like a man tormented by an evil dream.

"We can't walk away and do nothing about this."

"Tie vines, make long rope," suggested Little Koo. "I go down."

Mallet stared at him belligerently. "Why you? If anyone goes down it'll be me."

"Much weight," pointed out Little Koo, his almond eyes surveying Mallet's broad and hairy chest. "Too big."

"He's right," supported Kessler. "You're twice his bulk. Whoever goes down that hell-hole had better be our lightest member."

"Me," reminded Little Koo, contemplating the prospect with bland equanimity.

Troubled almost to distraction, Kessler went on, "If Alex is dead, I'm now the leader. I'm far from sure that we ought to let him go down."

"Why not?" asked Mallet.

"We might be throwing one casualty after another. Besides, if something menacing is lying in wait down at the bottom he can't be expected to face it with only a knife. He'll have to take his gun with him. We've already lost one weapon—it's down there with Alex. If we lose another—"

"There'll be only one left," Mallet finished for him. "The one you just lent Sammy."

Kessler nodded miserably. "One gun and no compass. It would cut our chances to nil."

"Have compass," informed Little Koo, producing the instrument in question. "Fell outside hole. I pick him up."

The sight of it relieved Kessler just sufficiently to enable him to reach a quick decision. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. We'll send him down with a torch, just far enough to see what's there. After that we'll consider whether anything more effective can be done."

In sweaty haste the three set to work, hacking and dragging thin but tough lengths of vine from the jungle. It took more time than they liked because they had to select the supine variety, sort-

ing it out from the very similar-looking ones whose sliced pieces writhed away in all directions. Mr. and Mrs. Mihailovik wanted to join in but Kessler made them remain on the path guarded by Sammy. One worry at a time was sufficient.

With a loop of vine around his small, narrow waist Little Koo went over the edge, a big blued-steel automatic in his right fist, a tight bunch of burning reeds in his left. His features revealed nothing whatever of his inward feelings. For all one could tell he did this sort of thing twice a day and three times on Sundays.

The vine paid out slowly, emitting creaking noises and showing a threatening tendency to fray around the knots. Gradually the flickering torch sank into the gloom while Feeny prowled around the rim, occasionally growling and baring his teeth as his ultra-sharp ears detected motions of the unknown creature far beneath.

By mutual consent they ceased lowering, glanced at each other, called down, "See anything yet?"

"All dark," came Little Koo's unemotional tones, echoing hollowly. "Must go down more."

They fed out more vine, their anxiety increasing with every yard that strained and creaked over the edge.

"Quicker!" urged the voice from below. "Flame burning low. Getting near fingers."

Six or seven yards slid over. With nerve-racking suddenness an ultra-rapid volley of shots reverberated up the hole. Sixteen of them: the full magazine.

Mallet and Kessler hauled for all they were worth, Grigor and Mrs. Mihailovik grabbing the end of the vine and pulling with them. Bill Mallet's muscles strove mightily to whisk Little Koo to the surface in the shortest possible time. Pieces of vine stripped themselves by friction as they rasped over the edge. Fibrous strands snapped and parted company with the main stalk. Kessler was tugging and praying breathlessly that the impromptu rope would hold, would not give way at the last moment.

All at once Little Koo popped up like a jack-in-the-box. Discarding the loop from around him, he ejected the empty magazine from his gun, clipped in a full one. It could not be said that his manner was strangely quiet because he was always quiet.

"Alex?" demanded Kessler.

"No head," said Little Koo. "Thing down there have bite him."

Looking a bit sick, Kessler asked, "You could see what was at the bottom?"

Little Koo nodded solemnly. "Big thing. Bright red all over. Many arms like spider. Great eyes—so!" He held his hands eighteen inches apart. "Bad eyes. Look at me like I am more meat." He surveyed his automatic with favour, finished, "I blow out eyes."

"You killed it?"

"No, only blow out eyes." He gestured towards the hole. "Listen."

They did so, heard clanks, thumps and scrabblings as of something cumbersome, clumsy and blind trying to climb up the hole and repeatedly falling back.

"What an end!" exclaimed Kessler, sad and frustrated. "What a hellish end!"

Savagely he kicked a lump of dry and rotten wood into the hole. An idea struck him as the wood plunged down.

"We can offer the dead nothing but vengeance."

"Have given that," said Little Koo, with mild satisfaction. "Blow out eyes."

"It isn't enough. Blind or not, it can still squat there and feed on Alex. We must kill it."

Mallet eyed him and asked, "How?"

"We'll throw down a lot of reeds, then a lighted torch and a pile of brushwood. Turn the whole tunnel into a roaring furnace."

"What if it's got another way out, an emergency escape route?"

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Kessler. "We'll have to chance it."

"There's a better way," Mallet suggested. He pointed to a big boulder half-hidden under a mass of growths. "If we can shove that into the hole we'll flatten the red devil before it has time to get out from under."

Working with furious energy they slashed away the twining obstructions, got behind the rock, braced themselves and heaved in unison. The rock shuddered, tilted, rolled over. A dozen fat and bright yellow grubs squirmed in the bare earth where it had stood.

Another simultaneous thrust and the boulder rolled to within a foot of the gap. They listened to make sure the quarry was still there. It could clearly be heard scratching and fumbling deep down. The rock went over the edge. It seemed to take a surprising time to drop but in the end they heard it wallop with a harsh, splintering sound coinciding with a squashy splatter.

Kessler ceremoniously brushed his hands as if to say, "That is that!" He consulted the compass, went round the corner to sum-

mon the others. Mallet and Little Koo heard him demanding in sharp tones, "What's she crying for now?"

"Symes," answered Sammy's voice. "It takes a woman to weep for men."

Thereafter Kessler took the lead with Feeny at his side ready to give warning that next time would be heeded. Little Koo followed, then Mr. and Mrs. Mihailovik, then Sammy Finestone. Bill Mallet functioned as rearguard.

Towards evening on the tenth day Mrs. Mihailovik collapsed. She did it without slightest sound or warning, one moment stumping along the trail with her usual thickset, heavy gait, the next moment lying in the path like a discarded bundle of rags.

Grigor's agonised call of, "Momma!" brought the line to a quick halt.

They grouped around her, bore her into a little clearing, tore open the first-aid kit. Here eyes were closed, her broad peasant face had a faint tinge of purple. There was no evidence that she was breathing. Kessler held her wrist, tried in vain to detect a pulse-beat. They stared at each other in silent impotence. Not a doctor among the lot.

Someone draped over her forehead a rag soaked in cold water. Another held an aromatic vial under her nose. A third patted her broad cheeks, rubbed her stubby hands. Together they fought as best they knew to summon her back to the weary world she'd so abruptly left. It was beyond their power.

Finally, Kessler took off his cap, said gently to the pale, dumb Grigor, "I'm sorry! I'm terribly sorry!"

"Momma!" said Grigor in heart-rending tones. "Oh, mine poor tired—" He switched into a guttural language the others could not understand, went onto his knees, wound his arms around her shoulders, clasped her tightly. Her spectacles lay to one side, trampled on, broken, ignored while he hugged her to him as though he'd never, never let her go. "Mine little Gerda. Oh, mine—"

The others moved off a little way, faced the jungle with weapons held ready while Grigor bade a broken farewell to half his life, half his soul, half his very being. Then with tender sympathy they drew him away, buried her under a shaft of blue sun and gave her a lonely cross to gleam amid the alien tangle.

Two hours later and seven miles farther on they made camp for the night. By that time Grigor had not uttered a single word. He'd marched along the trail like an automaton, neither knowing

nor caring where he was going or if he ever got there.

In the bright, comforting glow of the fire, Sammy Finestone leaned over, said to him, "Don't take it so hard—she wouldn't like it."

Grigor offered no reply. He sat staring fixedly into the flames with eyes that failed to see a spark or gleam.

"She went quickly and peacefully and that's the best way of all," soothed Sammy. "It was her heart, wasn't it?" Getting no response, he continued, "Several times while following close behind her I noticed her go short of breath and hold her side. She seemed to have difficulty in getting along. I thought maybe she'd developed a stitch or some sort of muscular cramp. But it was her heart. She must have been in pain. Why didn't she say?"

"Nod like to make trobble," said Grigor, dully. These were the first words he'd voiced.

They were also the last.

He never spoke again.

By four o'clock in the morning he was gone. Two moons rode high with the third far down when Kessler became bored with keeping watch from one point, quietly circled the camp, found Grigor's sleeping-place deserted. He did not sound an immediate alarm. Rest and sleep were too badly needed to disturb the others without second thoughts. So he stepped cautiously over the slumbering forms, searched the entire camp and the near surroundings.

No Grigor.

The jungle brooded threateningly all around. Something winged and phosphorescent flitted through the tree-tops, a tiny and silent ghost. Kessler considered the position. How and when Grigor had sneaked away there were no means of telling. The fellow might be miles off by now—if still alive.

But *where* he had gone was an easy guess. What to do about it? If he, Kessler set out in immediate pursuit he'd first have to awaken someone to take his place as night-guard. And for a time the small party would be split into two groups, thus doubling their chances of being attacked by any thing or things that may have been watching and biding such an opportunity these last eleven days, also reducing their ability to resist, making them more vulnerable. In this sorry fix unity was strength. Disunity meant eventual disaster.

With great reluctance he was forced to solve the problem in the only possible way—by waking the lot.

"Grigor's gone back."

"When?"

"I don't know. Either he crawled away unseen by me or perhaps he'd already gone when I took over the watch and I didn't notice his absence. He could have been gone for hours." He gloomed into the fire, added, "We can't abandon him to himself in this deadly maze."

"I'll go fetch him," volunteered Sammy, grabbing his machete.

"Neither can we send someone for him," Kessler went on, waving Sammy down. "We must stick together regardless of whether we go forward or backward."

Coming to his feet, Bill Mallet heaved his weighty pack onto his back, yawned widely, swung his bush-knife.

"Well, that settles it. We all go back. It's only about seven miles. What are seven miles?" He yawned again, answered it for them. "At this unearthly hour it's more like seventy. So what? Let's get moving."

Shouldering their possessions they set off, guns and machetes held ready. The glow of the fire died away behind them. The moons sent down just sufficient light to make the path a vaguely mottled streak through the greenery. Feeny trotted at the head, sniffing suspiciously every now and again, growling low in his belly from time to time.

They found Grigor where expected, lying on his side in the clearing, body curled, legs drawn up, a bottle from the first-aid kit half-empty in his left hand. His right arm sprawled protectively across the fresh mound. The wooden cross posed close by his hand. He was already cold.

Using the spade, they put him down in the dark alongside mine little Gerda. Where he wanted to be. The goal toward which he had crept through miles of peril in the deep of the night.

He'd thought it over, had Grigor, during those few hours away from her. And he'd made up his mind. Always they had taken it for granted that they'd be together, come what may, right to the very last. He was not leaving her, not even in death.

Kessler made a note in his diary. Day number thirteen. "I estimate we have northed something over one hundred miles. We've been moving faster these last couple of days."

He did not mention why they'd been speedier. Everyone knew there were two reasons. Firstly they'd dropped the slow-movers. Secondly, at the rate they'd been going their food supplies would not last despite that they had taken over the rations of the dead. A hundred-odd miles in thirteen days. It wasn't enough.

Did this accursed jungle never end?

Breaking a pack of concentrated food, Kessler gave it to Feeny, opened another for himself, ate slowly. "One consolation—if you can call it that—is that the load goes down a fraction every time we have a meal."

"There are plenty of roots and fruits around," Bill Mallet remarked. "I know space-rule number one: eat nothing not definitely known to be edible. The penalty for disregarding it can be more than awful. But sooner or later we'll have to take the chance."

"Not eat—die slowly," Little Koo pointed out. "Eat wrong thing—die quickly."

"And, mister, you can be really *glad* to die quickly," Mallet assured. "On other planets some of the most luscious-looking fruits I've ever seen can make you expire screaming, with your toes tucked tightly into your armpits."

"Well, you'd need a shorter grave in that attitude," said Sammy Finestone. "It would save about half the labour."

Mallet eyed him carefully. "A fortnight ago I'd have laid heavy bets against any humour from you, ghoulish or otherwise."

"Why?"

"Because I'd have taken it for granted that by this time you'd be either dead or a nervous wreck."

"I *am* a nervous wreck," declared Sammy. "I'm spending all my time fighting it down."

"That's the boy!" said Mallet, inwardly amazed to find himself warming toward him. "Keep it up and you'll get through."

Pulling irritably at the long beard he'd acquired, Kessler said seriously to Sammy, "Don't think you're all alone in having to drive yourself along. Every one of us is like that." He felt for, found and scratched a pair of canine ears. "Except Feeny, perhaps."

Hearing his name mentioned, Feeny agitated the stump he used for a tail.

Looking at the dog, Sammy commented, "It beats me how he manages to detect traps like the one Symes fell into. He's warned us of four these last couple of days. But for him we'd each be down a shaft feeding a crimson horror."

Kessler rubbed the ears, stroked the furry back, made no reply. But he was thinking deeply. By this time the original party had been cut in half. They'd lost four of their members. Each one of the casualties had been a real, genuine loss greatly felt by those

who still survived.

If by any chance Feeny should meet death it would be decidedly serious for the rest. Feeny was only an ordinary, medium-sized dog but nevertheless a person in his own right and a necessary one. Without him they'd have to cut long sticks and probe the path every step of the tortuous way, slowing themselves down to a third of their former pace. Feeny was wanted. Everyone was wanted, those who'd gone and those still here.

He stood up, knowing that it was futile to pile tomorrow's problems on top of yesterday's woes. What was to be would be—and they'd have to face it.

"Let's get going."

They moved off, Kessler and Feeny in front, Mallet at the rear. Though neither knew it, the first and last man had been pondering along similar lines. Similar but not the same because Mallet was still busy with mental readjustments.

As rearguard Mallet could see all the others as often as twists and turns in the path permitted. Therefore he was deeply aware of how many were in plain view. The distance from front to back had been twice as long when first they'd started this dreadful pilgrimage. Longer because others had marched between. Symes, for instance. A good guy. A first class spaceman. Did he feel their present lack of numbers solely because of Symes?

No!

He also missed a buck nigger.

And a pair of Slav dimwits.

If destiny struck again he was just as surely going to miss a flashy Hebe.

And a scruffy little Chink.

And a four-legged fleabag.

He was going to miss the rabble!

"Never forget this, Mallet," he growled to himself. "If you live, never forget it."

Sammy glanced backward over a shoulder. "Say something?"

"I am metaphorically kicking myself," said Mallet, grimly.

"That's more than I can do," Sammy confessed.

"Why?"

"I've made myself sore with the same mistreatment."

This statement filed itself in Mallet's mind along with all other recently acquired data. So other people found good cause to punish their own behinds, just like he did. So other folk made crass mistakes but later had the grace to regret them.

Surprising how much everyone has in common!

Well, the proper thing is to live in tolerance and die with dignity.

He was learning to do the first.

It remained to be seen whether he could manage the second.

The path gradually rose and went over a bare-topped hill. For the first time since starting out they had a clear view over an area extending miles around. In every direction it was the same: a solid, unbroken mass of vegetation except to the east where a range of mountains climbed black and stark against the burning sky.

Dabbing a rag over his streaming face, Kessler griped, "When down in the forest I wished myself to blazes out of it. Now I am out I prefer to be back—it provided shade if nothing else."

"Noise," announced Little Koo, pointing eastward. "Over there. *Whuyoum-whuyoum*."

"I don't hear it." Shading his eyes, Kessler stared in the direction indicated. "Don't see anything, either." He glanced at the others. "Do you?"

"Not a thing," Sammy admitted.

"Thought I saw a vague black speck soaring over that range," said Mallet, doubtfully. "But I'm not sure. It might be just my imagination."

"Is it still there?"

"No. It seemed to float over and drop from sight."

"I refuse to get excited about it," declared Kessler, mopping his features again. "Another hour under this sun and we'll breed delusions considerably crazier." He moved onward. "Let's beat it to the shelter of the trees."

Feeny barked and bristled at a nearby rock. Kessler slowed, edged toward it, gun in hand. Stiff-legged and alert, Feeny went round the other side of the rock. A thing like a ten-limbed lizard promptly bolted with long undulating motions, vanished over the rise. Feeny came back rumbling his disappointment.

"Eight feet long and half of it teeth." Kessler sniffed his contempt. "And it flees when a dog barks."

"Maybe it's allergic to harsh noises," suggested Sammy. "If Feeny had kept quiet it might have swallowed him at a gulp."

"That's what I detest about this world—its eerie silence," informed Kessler. "Back on Earth there'd be continual pandemonium in a jungle like this. Monkeys shouting, parrots squawking, multi-million insects setting up a tremendous din. Here, nothing

makes a sound that might give it away. Big, snaky things slide around without a rustle. Gigantic red spiders wait silently down holes. When on watch night-times I've either seen or sensed things that sneaked by without the crack of a single twig. It isn't natural. It gets me down."

"Let's sing then," Sammy proposed. "It'll keep up our spirits and scare away everything else."

"Sing what?" invited Kessler, approving the idea.

Sammy thought it over. "How about *There's A Long, Long Trail A-Winding?*"

They bawled it as they marched onward, all except Little Koo who didn't know a word of it. Then they turned to *Roll Me Over* and the *Song of the Legionnaires* and half a dozen more. It speeded their pace down into and through the trees. Mallet roared a solo in a harsh, unmusical bass, an Australian backwoods ditty called *Clancy's Gone A-Droving Down The Cooper*.

Finishing it, he picked on Little Koo. "We've not heard a squeak out of you. How about giving us one of your own?"

Little Koo looked sheepish.

"Come on!" urged Mallet. "You can't be any worse than I am."

Self-consciously and with great reluctance Little Koo obliged, breaking into an excruciating and unmelodious series of shrill, wailing half-tones that made them think of a tomcat being violently sick.

"What's all that about?" demanded Mallet when the agony broke off, apparently in the middle of a bar.

"The petals drift down like snowflakes and gently light upon the pale arms of my loved one," explained Little Koo, with sudden and surprising fluency.

"Humph!" Mallet rubbed one side of his nose. "Very pretty."

Fancy Little Koo having someone about whom to sing. The thought had not occurred to him before. He tried to picture her in his mind. Probably she was yellow-faced, almond-eyed, plump, jolly, a good cook and the mother of seven fat kids. Probably she was twice the size of Little Koo, bossed him and his household with a firm, efficient hand and had a name like Sublime Fragrance.

"Very pretty," he repeated, to Little Koo's inward gratification.

"How about *Finnigan's Wake?*" suggested Sammy, willing to bellow anew.

"I'm out of breath." Kessler hacked viciously at a waist-high sprawl of vines across the path. "The one in the front gets all the

work."

"And takes most of the risks," added Sammy, pointedly. "Don't you think we ought to have turns at being in the lead?"

"It's an idea." Kressler stepped through while the raw ends of sliced growths writhed backward. "I'll consider it. Remind me of it in a couple of months' time."

There was no need to do so.

He didn't last that long.

Three days later they encountered the path-makers. What had created the jungle trails had puzzled them repeatedly. It was not the huge, snaky things like the one Hannibal Paton had tried to carve. They'd caught glimpses of a dozen of those to date but no more had attacked and none had shown themselves actually upon the path.

The smaller lizardlike creatures weren't responsible, either. They were too few in numbers, too light in bulk. It had been apparent from the start that the tortuous trails must have been made by rare but very weighty users. Parts of the paths were badly overgrown, being slowly reclaimed by the jungle, but the portions still bare were—except where crimson trappers lurked—firm and solid as if pounded down by many monstrous feet.

About to round yet another bend, Kessler stopped as a distant rumble reached his ears. The others heard it at the same time, halted close behind. Feeny twitched his ears and displayed great uneasiness.

The sound was doubly strange and menacing in such a world of utter silence. It suggested the sudden abolition of a natural law. Noise! Low-pitched and heavy, with an earth-shaking quality about it like that made by a thousand buffalo on the rampage. A dull but intense and gradually nearing thunder as of things beating violently upon the ground.

Feeny yelped and ran round in tight circles while Kessler said, "I don't like this. Something tells me to get off the path." He gave a swift glance at nearby jungle while the noise grew louder. "There!" Indicating a part of the surrounding maze that looked slightly less thick and tangled, he started to hack his way through.

The rest chopped and slashed with him, got thirty yards off the trail when the sound roared around the next corner. Deep in the bush, Mallet snatched up Feeny, held a hairy, sweat-soaked hand over his muzzle to keep him quiet. Their shirts were sticking wetly to their backs as they stood in the alien hell and watched.



A moment later sixty or seventy immense creatures charged one behind the other along the path in the manner of runaway locomotives. They had thick, drab hides, three-horned heads of appalling ugliness, and small piggish eyes that glared stupidly and stubbornly straight ahead. Their weight seemed to be completely out of proportion to their size, as if they had fifty-tons mass for twenty-tons bulk. Each one's four pairs of elephantlike feet stamped vines and all other obstructions deep into the earth, remaking the route for a month to come.

One could feel the reverberation of their passing even from thirty yards away. The thudding of it trembled through the earth and ran up the tree-trunks, making top branches quiver. As they tore clumsily by, making no noise other than the beat of feet and snorting of nostrils, Kessler thought of gigantic rhinoceroses armed with triple horns.

The things went past at an ungainly, irresistible gallop and were gone, flattening everything in their way, smashing down the camouflaged doors of spiderlike entities which, when danger had passed, would have to clamber up their holes and make another false surface

with dirt and spittle.

Emerging from their hiding-place, the waiters in the green gloom listened carefully for indications of any second onrush from the north but nothing was to be heard other than the cumbersome dum-dumming of those just gone.

Staring at his big automatic, Kessler commented ruefully, "Fat lot of use this would have been. Nothing less than a seventy-five millimetre bazooka could have made one of those pause in its pace."

"What were they?" wondered Mallet, dumping Feeny on the path.

"Haven't the vaguest notion. Alex was the only one who knew anything about this planet and what he could remember wasn't much." Kessler marched round the bend, came to a two-way split in the trail. He consulted the compass, pointed leftward. "That way."

It brought them to a river. The path led straight down to the bank at a point well-trampled for fifty yards upstream and downstream. Evidently a favourite drinking-place for the three-horned monsters.

The waters were a cloudy yellow and fast running, making a barrier thirty yards wide and of unknown depth. The opposite bank was dead north according to the compass.

Frowning at the swift current, Kessler opined, "I wouldn't care to try swim across that. It may be going considerably faster under the surface." He mopped perspiration, surveyed without enthusiasm the greenish glitters produced by blue sunlight on yellow water. The river smelled of rotten apples and something else pungent but not identifiable. "It's too risky."

"The alternative is to go back to that fork and follow the trail's other branch," said Mallet. "It was running westward but maybe it'll turn north farther along."

"I'd rather not do that if it can be avoided." Kessler examined the banks and the trees on both sides. "A captive log floated over at the end of a vine might get us across."

"If we can find a suitable log in less than a week," countered Mallet, waving his hand to indicate the complete lack of anything in view.

Kessler said, "In the jungles of Earth the natives build rope bridges and throw them up pretty quickly. Does anyone know how to make a rope bridge?"

Nobody did know, but Mallet ventured, "I imagine they have people both sides the river for that job. So we've got to get across

to build ourselves a bridge to get across."

Little Koo piped up, "Swing over—like monkey."

"You must be telepathic," declared Kessler. "I was toying with that very idea." He had another close look at the trees. "If we can find a suitable rope—"

They sought along the bank as far as they could go and discovered what they wanted. Of the numerous trees that arched partway across the river there was one with half a dozen big vines dangling almost to water level.

Bringing one of them in to the bank wasn't too difficult—they cut a long, thin liana out of the jungle, tied an oval stone to its end, whirled it like a bolas and got it wound around their objective at the tenth try. They hauled it in. Because of its arc its end rose out of hand-reach as it came into the bank and Mallet had to climb a nearby tree to secure it.

"I'll go first." Kessler transferred the oval stone to the dangling vine, swung across the river, caught it as it came back. It had gone a mere two feet over the top of the opposite and higher bank. Satisfied, he tightened the straps of his pack, made sure his weapon and ammunition were secure, handed the compass to Mallet. "This is too precious to risk. If I get over all right you can boost it across to me by itself."

Unconscious of being grimly prophetic, he took hold of the vine, tested its strength and toughness by pulling it as hard as he could.

"The stone got a hefty shove," remarked Sammy, showing anxiety. "That's more than you'll get by just kicking off from this tree. What if you don't quite reach the other side?"

"I will." Kessler pointed upward. "This vine is suspended at least five feet off-centre toward the other bank and the level over there is quite a bit higher. I'll make it easily." He took a fresh grip, braced himself.

He thrust mightily with both feet and swooped outward. The vine creaked in protest and did not break. But it did tear away from its hold on the overhead branch. It dropped him right in mid-stream and at once there shot toward him a long and violent eddy as of something moving swiftly under water.

Standing nearest the river's edge, Sammy Finestone let out a yelp of alarm as Kessler hit with a shower of cloudy yellow spray and the curious eddy appeared. Flinging off his pack, he raised arms above his head.

"Lay off, you fool! Don't!" shouted Mallet. He raced from his place by the tree with the intention of grabbing the other.

"You don't know what's lurking—"

Too late. Sammy dived in.

There was a mad swirl in mid-river. Kessler's head bobbed up, went down. The water around him heaved itself, churned to foam, became tinged with pink.

Sammy reappeared, flung backward by the sheer violence of the sub-surface disturbance. Came another great agitation accompanied by a small waterspout. An arm swung momentarily into view, protruding from the foam in a last dreadful and bloody gesture before Kessler vanished for ever. Sammy, still near the bank, gave a sudden gasp.

Racing downstream to keep pace with him, Mallet sprang waist-deep into the water, grabbed Sammy by the hair, drew him into the bank. Bending, he got him under the arms, dragged him clear of the river.

Or part of him. All but the lower legs. There was nothing below the knees, nothing but pulses of blood from severed vessels.

"Oh, God!" he breathed, feeling an awful sickness in the pit of his stomach.

Gently lowering the other, he found the first-aid kit, tore it open, scanned its contents with a sense of terrible helplessness. It held no surgical instruments and he wouldn't have known how to use them if there had been any. There was a hypodermic syringe and several needles. Also phials of drugs, liquid and solid. How does one fill and use a syringe? Which drug would be best employed and how much of it? Exactly where should one inject?

Sammy stirred dazedly, tried to sit up. He was white-faced and dreamy like one who doesn't yet realise what has happened.

"Maxie?" he whispered. "Is he —?"

"Him gone," informed Little Koo, studying him slit-eyed. "You lie still."

"Me? Why?" He strained further, seeking command of nether limbs that didn't exist. Then he looked down.

Mallet returned and Little Koo said, "Him faint."

"Just as well. This stuff out of the kit is about the best we can do for him. Quick, raise his right stump!"

Working swiftly, he sprayed the raw end with medicinal sealing-plastic. The stuff settled on the wound in the form of a fine mist that covered the surface and set glass-hard within seconds. The first layer congealed the blood and closed the vessels. More layers hardened over it, one upon the other, building up until the whole wound had become encased in a sterile and solid mould. Then

he did the same with the other stump.

As a swift technique for coping with grave emergencies it was topnotch—but no ultimate solution. It was good enough to hold a patient together until he could be rushed into more competent hands and up-to-date surgical facilities. That and no more.

Mallet reached for soft pads and bandages, not that they were needed for the wounds but because they would provide some cushioning and comfort. His hand stayed outstretched as Little Koo whipped out his automatic—their only remaining weapon—and spoke calmly.

“Water devil!”

Glancing backward over his shoulder, Mallet saw a great, flat, heart-shaped head sticking out the middle of the river. It was the size of a boat and had two white saucerlike eyes that stared at them cold and unblinking. Thin strings of weed dangled from horny projections on the outlandish face. Its jaws were still munching as though enjoying a delicacy to the last.

The automatic spat savagely again and again. One of the saucer eyes blotted out and green liquid poured from where it had been. The head immediately plunged beneath the water. The river went wild as the thing thrashed around on the bed.

Brought round by the hard crack of shots, Sammy stirred, opened his eyes. “My legs! It took my legs!” In tones of childish wonderment, he added, “I didn’t even feel them go. Just like a slight stab of pain, hardly noticeable—but it took my legs!”

“Easy now. Don’t worry. You’ll be all right.” Mallet continued with the bandaging.

“All right? No I won’t. Not in this place.” He paused, gave a brief shiver as if sensing a queer coldness amid all this heat. “I’ve had it and you know it. Better leave me.”

Mallet shouted at him in his most bullying tones, “Look, the fact that you’re temporarily indisposed doesn’t give you the right to talk a lot of nonsense. So shut up!”

Managing a thin smile, Sammy said, “You can’t fool me, talking that way. I know I’m next for the spade.”

“We’re going to carry you,” Mallet retorted. “It will be quite a change. I’m fed up digging holes. You can drop once and for all any idea that you can wangle me into digging another one.”

Now taking charge, Mallet decided that the river must be regarded as an impassable barrier at this particular point. Had there been only the two of them—Little Koo and himself—he’d have risked a swing on one of the other vines or, better still, on three or

four if a bunch could be found anchored sufficiently near together.

But with Feeny to take across and Sammy to handle the job became too awkward. It was easier to turn back to the westward path and seek some other more favourable branch running north. This meant adding unknown mileage to the seemingly endless journey ahead. Nevertheless it had to be faced. Obstacles that cannot be surmounted must be detoured.

They trimmed a pair of straight, tough branches and Little Koo shaped between them a flexible mattress of woven reeds. The deftness with which his long, thin, yellow fingers worked was a revelation to the onlooking Mallet. It was obvious that Little Koo had an aptitude for this kind of task, for the job was done with speed and dexterity he could never hope to match.

Sammy rode on this impromptu but effective litter, protesting for the first half-hour then giving up as no notice was taken. His machete lay at his side. There was remote chance of his making use of it in any circumstances, but they were reluctant to abandon the weapon. Besides, its mere presence had good psychological effect on the man being carried: it implied the others' acceptance that he was still a valuable part of their armed strength. Nobody knew better than he how little justified was such a notion. A man with half-legs is like a fly without wings unless and until he can be fitted with mechanical appendages not available on an alien world.

But the shining blade reposed there by his side, winking and blinking under rare shafts of blue sunlight and seeming to say to him, "You're still in the running, Sammy boy. I'd be wasting my time lying here if you were no good. I am the fighting extension of a strong right arm and you've still got arms, haven't you, Sammy boy?"

So he lay white-faced in the litter and caught the continually reassuring gleams from the blade and watched branches drift overhead and bit his bottom lip in suppressed agony and tried to ignore the fierce fire blazing in his severed limbs. He was losing no blood, the sealing plastic ensured that much. Neither could germs penetrate it to get at his raw flesh. But the bacteria swarming in the yellow river were a different proposition. They'd got at him early, while he was still open. They were now shut in behind the plastic and battle raged between them and his white corpuscles.

The burning was hip-high by the middle of the second night. Unable to sleep because of it, Sammy lay between the fire and the recumbent form of Little Koo. Nearby Bill Mallet patrolled slowly round and round, doing his spell on watch. Feeny sprawled

atop their pile of packs and whined in his dreams. Sammy sighed, forced himself partway up to sitting position. Reflections of the flames flickered in his dark eyes. Mallet came across, knelt beside him, whispered so as not to disturb Little Koo.

"How're you doing?"

"Not so good. I —"

"Wait a sec." Going to his pack, Mallet edged it from under Feeny, foraged inside it, came back. "I got these out of the boat. Thought I'd save them for the glorious moment when the rescue-station's dome came in sight." He exhibited a small can of cigarettes. "We won't need as many now."

"Keep them," breathed Sammy. He tried to suppress a gasp and failed. "Shame to bust the can open at this time. They won't keep for months once the air gets at them."

"Little Koo doesn't smoke. There's only you and me." Mallet broke the vacuum, flipped the lid up. He gave Sammy a cigarette, lit it for him, had one himself. "Could you do with a shot of morphine?"

"Know how?"

"No."

Propping on one hand, Sammy leaned awkwardly toward him. "You two have lugged me along for a couple of days. How much ground d'you think you've covered?"

"About seven miles," Mallet hazarded.

"Three and a half miles per day. Not much, is it? Every time you meet a tangle you have to put me down while you chop a way through it. You've only got two hands. You haven't got indestructible legs, either. It's obvious that you can't go on this way for ever."

"So what?" Mallet eyed him in the light of the flames.

"Little Koo has got a gun."

"So what?" Mallet repeated, without slightest change of expression.

"You know what!"

Squirting a thin stream of tobacco smoke, Mallet watched it disperse. "Maybe I look a bum. Maybe you think I am a bum. And maybe you're right. But I'm not a murderer."

"Don't look at it that way," pleaded Sammy. He winced again. Shinning beads were standing out on his forehead. "You know damn well I'll go sooner or later. I'm asking you to make it easier for me. They shoot horses, don't they?"

"You really mean you want us to make it easier for ourselves,"

said Mallet. He spat in the fire which promptly hissed back. "For two pins I'd knock your stupid block off."

Sammy lay back and grinned weakly. "One thing you do excel at, Bill, is comforting a fellow's ego in a menacing sort of way."

"I'll go get that morphine."

Tramping to the other side of the fire, he pawed among the supplies. Bill, he thought. It was the first time Sammy had called him by that name. It might have been the same with all the others if cruel fate hadn't put them under the sod.

Paton, for instance. Perhaps by now they'd have grown out of, "Here, pick this up, Paton," and, "Yes, Mr. Mallet." Perhaps they'd be talking kind of differently with, "Catch this, Hanny," and, "Okay, Bill."

Maybe Mrs. Mihailovik would be calling him 'Beel' and he'd be addressing her as Gerda or possibly Mom. Once upon a time the notion would have embarrassed him beyond measure. More than that: it would have irked him into unconcealed sourness. But not now, not now. Times change. People change with them.

A cockeyed rhythm kept churning through his mind, repeating itself monotonously, jeering at him, mocking him as he sought and found the morphine.

Sammy is a Sheeny,

Sammy is a Yid.

He resented it while it pestered him. Sammy had dived after Kessler without a moment's thought of hesitation and now he was begging them to use the gun and thus relieve themselves of the burden he'd placed upon them.

Paton had dashed in where angels feared to tread, his only motive being that of diverting danger from others. Gerda and Grigor had been willing to die alone rather than handicap the rest. Even Feeny would foolhardily take on one of those fifty-ton gallopers in effort to save one of them from being trampled under foot.

And what had he, Mallet, got? A dancing-girl tattooed on his forearm and a spray of shooting stars across his broad, muscular back. A wad of hair on his chest. A bull-body and the constitution to plough doggedly ahead until he dropped.

All the rest was ignorance. His superb knowledge of reactive-engineering had now become so much useless lumber. He knew too little about surgery and drugs. He lacked Feeny's sharp ears and supersensitive nose. He hadn't got Little Koo's agile fingers and bland acceptance of the dark future. He couldn't even swim, like Sammy. He wasn't much bloody good at anything.

Except comforting stricken folk in a menacing sort of way. Yes, that was a mite in his favour, a very small chalk-mark for the recording angels to put against his name.

Like most persons deeply exercised about their own misapprehensions he was going to absurd lengths to under-rate himself. It was the swing of the psychic pendulum which dives to the opposite extreme before it begins to settle down in moderation. There was a reason for it, a very good reason. Deep down inside himself—or was it outside and far away—somewhere a voice was calling, calling.

He came back holding the needle. "I'm taking it for granted that one filling represents one maximum dose and I hope I'm right. Want to chance it?"

"Yes." Sammy's face twisted in pain. He dropped his half-smoked cigarette. "Anything, anything to make this more bearable."

"I think the thighs might be best—they're nearest the source of the trouble. Like to try a half-shot in each one?"

Sammy agreed. Kneeling beside him, Mallet administered the stuff. He'd never felt more shaky in his life but his broad, hairy fingers were made firm and gentle by sheer will-power.

He stood up. "Feel better?"

"Not yet. Probably it takes a minute or so." Sammy lay sweating. After what seemed an age the lines of pain left his face and he said, "It's going off now. It's easing a lot." He closed his eyes. "Thanks, Bill."

Light from the second moon angled through a tree-gap, illuminated his face in damp paleness. Mallet waited awhile, bent over him, listened to his breathing. Satisfied that he was asleep, he resumed his lonely vigil.

In the mid-morning as they were toiling up a slight rise Mallet felt a pull on the litter, looked back. Little Koo had stopped and was lowering his end of the shafts. Mallet put his down likewise.

"What's the matter?"

"Him not look. Not more. Nearly roll off. Think him dead," said Little Koo, doubtfully.

Feeny went to the body, sniffed at it, let go a thin, reedy howl. Mallet made close examination, lifting Sammy's eyelids, feeling his wrist, listening to his chest.

He reached for the spade.

When he had finished by patting shape and firmness into the earthy mound he became aware of Little Koo standing patiently

nearby holding a newly-cut cross and making ready to echo the inevitable, "Amen! "

"I don't know that he wants that," said Mallet.

"Not want?" Little Koo stared aghast at his own workmanship, his air that of one who in his appalling ignorance has committed an unknown enormity.

"I'm not sure. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn't—but somehow I don't think so."

"Him not say?" inquired Little Koo, apologetically.

"Shut up—let me think a minute."

Mallet tormented his mind in effort to make it produce hazy fragments of memory, one of those negligible items of information one picks up haphazardly and never expects to use. Why is it that people know so little about people?

Finally he said, "I've got it. If I'm wrong, he'll forgive me."

Ramming the cross into the opposite side of the path, he cut and trimmed half a dozen straight branches, fastened them into two triangles, fixed them together, mounted the assembly on the grave. Then he looked at the sky.

"I don't know what to say."

"Good feller," suggested Little Koo, fearful of another blunder.

"Yes, that'll do," agreed Mallet. "One cannot say more."

Collecting their packs and weapons they moved onward. Two men and a dog. Behind them the Star of David stood amid the trees.

Day number thirty-two, or was it thirty-six, or fifty-six? Nobody knew, nobody cared. They had lost count, there being no point in keeping it. About the only crumb of comfort was that they had crossed the river where it was narrow and had big rocks that served as stepping-stones. They were nothing once more.

Total mileage to date was anyone's guess. Perhaps three hundred, perhaps four hundred. At very most a mere quarter of the way to the dome, assuming that Symes' original estimate had been correct. They had several times their distance still to go.

A roughneck, a Chink and a dog.

Eh?

Three men!

Three men named Mallet, Little Koo and Feeny. One was

built like a beaten-up pugilist. One was small, skinny and had almond eyes. One had four legs and could not speak. But what of it? They were three men on the march to death or salvation. Three men—and a spade.

They had finished their noon meal and by accident Mallet picked up Little Koo's pack. The packs looked pretty much the same but he knew it wasn't his the moment he lifted it. Putting it down without remark, he took his own, heaved its straps over his shoulders, grasped his machete.

From then on he kept surreptitious watch on Little Koo. It didn't take long to discover what the other was up to. The technique was cunning. He would have noticed it before had there been any reason for suspicion.

At meal-times they took turn and turn about breaking a food-pack for Feeny. Little Koo was straightforward about this matter but not when he came to break another one for himself. He had an open one which he'd produce, go through the motions of unfastening and then pretend to eat. No empty container was thrown away. The flat box went back into his pack still full, in readiness for the next performance. Since his pack felt twenty per cent heavier than Mallet's, he must have been doing this at least the last six days.

Yet Little Koo was not starving. He was eating by night during his spells on watch. Keeping one eye open as he lay by the fire, Mallet saw him gorging himself on the fruits of the jungle, consuming strange roots and queer nuts, filling himself in readiness for the next day. The motive was obvious and Mallet objected to it. He raised the matter immediately he'd discovered the facts.

"Not enough food, eh? It will give out before we're halfway to the dome, won't it?"

"Not know."

"You know all right! Don't give me that! You've worked it out in your mind. You've decided we'll never make it unless we can live off the jungle. Somebody's got to be the guinea-pig for that and it might as well be you."

"Not understand," protested Little Koo, his black eyes inscrutable.

"Bunkum!" Mallet glowered at the other as if he'd been found guilty of a major crime. "Unknown foods are highly dangerous. There's no telling what they can do to a man. So you argue that if you get away with this it will prove we're safe. If you don't, and it kills you"—he tapped his pack—"there'll be more rations for Feeny and me."

"Not care, if dead," said Little Koo, thwarting him with true Oriental logic.

"I care," shouted Mallet. "I can't talk to your pack after you've gone. I can't use it for company. Neither can it take your turn at night-watch. Who's going to stand guard while the other sleeps?"

"Nice dog," suggested Little Koo, pointing at Feeny.

"He's not enough." He prodded the other in the chest, his manner tough, authoritative. Completely unaware of the imbecility of what he was saying, he informed, "I'm the boss of what's left of this outfit and I forbid you to die on me, see?"

"Not yet," agreed Little Koo—and faithfully kept his promise for ten days.

First sign that he was about to renege came when he fell flat on his face, clawed momentarily at the earth, forced himself to his feet and stumbled on. After ten yards he caught up with the waiting Mallet, refused to let himself fall again. The result was peculiar.

He stood swaying as he faced Mallet, his features the colour of old ivory. His knees bent slowly, ever so slowly, as if being pulled down in spite of all his efforts to prevent it. In this manner he sank to kneeling position, murmured apologetically, "Cannot help," and bowed forward into Mallet's ready arms.

Stripping him of gun, ammunition-belt and pack, Mallet laid him on a mossy bank while Feeny circled around whining querulously. The blue sun poured through a leaf-gap and burned the back of his neck while he stooped over Little Koo and tried to bring him round.

"Don't skip out, d'you hear?" An urgent, imperative shake. "Don't go away like all the others did. I'm not going to make a hole for you. Listen, I said I'm not digging another hole. I refuse to do it." He snatched up the spade, violently flung it into the jungle. A pulse was beating visibly in his forehead. "See, I've thrown it away. It's not going to be used again. Never, never, never! Neither for you or me." He patted the ivory cheeks. "Come on, wake up, will you? *Wake up!*"

Little Koo obeyed, woke up, rolled onto his side and was sick. When he had finished, Mallet lugged him to his feet, held him by the shoulders.

"All right now?" he asked anxiously.

"Plenty weak." Little Koo slumped in his grasp.

"We'll sit a bit."

Lowering the other, he squatted on the bank, took Little Koo's head in his lap. Feeny barked an agitated warning as huge, sinuous



coils glided among the growths fifty yards away. Mallet snatched up the automatic, fired four shots. The coils slid deeper into the jungle, not fearing the bullets but hating the noise. He continued to nurse Little Koo, cursing his own impotence and appealing to the head cradled in his arms.

"Make a fight for it, little feller. There's a long, long way to go but we can do it if we stick together. We've come a long way already. You're not going to give up now, are you?"

The sun sank into the horizon and Feeny whined and darkness came until the three moons appeared. Still Mallet sat holding Little Koo and occasionally voicing words of encouragement to ears that did not hear. It seemed to him that the blue sun had churned up his own mind, making his thoughts muddled and out of control.

It seemed to him that he was holding in his protecting arms not only Little Koo but also all the others who had gone. Symes and Paton, the Mihailoviks, Kessler and Sammy. Aye, and all those he had known in long-gone aeons when there had existed a great silvery cylinder called the *Star Queen*.

And it seemed to him that now the voice was calling more strongly, more insistently than ever, though for the life of him he

could not determine precisely what it was trying to say.

With the dawn he was sitting in dew-dampened clothes, his eyes red-rimmed and baggy. Little Koo was still alive but senseless, incapable of response, in a complete stupor as though heavily drugged.

This state of affairs reminded Mallet that people like Little Koo were alleged to be incurable opium addicts. Perhaps Little Koo had a secret cache of the stuff either in his pack or on his person. He searched both and made a thorough job of it. No opium. An unknown number of days ago he had searched Sammy the same way. No diamonds. It looked as if nobody went around loaded with the sort of junk they were generally reputed to carry.

In some ways the world of life is a great big damnable lie, organised, bossed and cosseted by liars. In some ways the moment of death is the moment of truth. Little Koo had nothing worthy of note except a cracked and faded picture of a tipsy-roofed village with an ornamental carp-pond in the foreground, a range of mountains in the background. Just that. Nothing more. His paradise. His heaven upon earth.

"I'll get you there," swore Mallet, "if it's the last thing I do!"

Buckling the gun and ammo-belt to his waist, he stuffed one pack with as much as it could hold, fastened it in reverse so that it hung upon his chest instead of his back. Part of the first-aid kit he crammed into his pockets, the rest he left upon the bank. Sticking a machete point-first into the ground so that its hilt could be grasped without bending for it, he hoisted Little Koo onto his back, gripped his two thin wrists in a hairy paw, took the machete in the other hand and set off.

Much relieved by this renewed activity Feeny pranced ahead, sniffing here and there, glancing behind at frequent intervals to make sure he was being followed. Half an hour's march, five minutes' rest; half an hour's march, five minutes' rest. It was a good thing the fates had given him a big, powerful body while ordaining that Little Koo should be a shrivelled wisp of a man.

Mallet began to talk as he toiled along. Sometimes to Little Koo who hung limp and silent over one broad shoulder. Sometimes to Feeny who with incomparable loyalty accepted any and every eccentricity as the most natural thing in the world. And sometimes he spoke to nobody at all, uttering angry phrases born of the blue sun, the alien atmosphere. He was functioning physically but breaking mentally and did not know it.

At the eighth rest-period Little Koo made a faint rattling sound

in his throat, opened black eyes for the first time since yesterday and whispered, "So sorry."

Then in his own quiet, humble manner he slipped away to wherever Little Koos go. And Mallet could not see that he had gone. He picked him up, bore him through the steaming green hell, put him down, picked him up, carried him onward mile after weary mile, hour after burning hour. Often he talked to him and most times Little Koo answered.

"We're getting there, little feller. Done fifty miles today. What d'you think of that?"

"Very good indeed," the dead face would say in perfect English.

"Maybe we'll do a hundred tomorrow. Under the blue sun. It's trying to burn me down, to roast my brain and frizzle my guts, but I won't let it, see? It stabs right into my head and screams, 'Drop, damn you, drop!' but I won't drop, see? That's Bill Mallet for you. I spit upon the blue sun." Then he'd spit to demonstrate while Little Koo lay stricken dumb with admiration. "Next Thursday week we'll be in the dome. They'll fix up a pair of legs for Sammy. Next Tuesday month we'll be boosting back to Earth." He'd snort in triumph. "Home for Christmas. Eh?"

"You bet!" Little Koo would respond with suitable enthusiasm.

"Beef bones for Feeny," he'd add, speaking to the dog. "How'd you like that?"

"I can hardly wait," Feeny would say, running eagerly ahead.

It is so wonderful to have true comrades in what otherwise would be a dreadful solitude.

To hear them speak—they and the voice that kept calling, calling.

He'd turned east in his delirium. The compass lay where it had been dropped two days ago: miles away under a beautiful orchid that stank. He did not know east from west, north from south, but his big body stubbornly kept on going like a worn machine that refuses to give up. All the time Feeny remained a jump in advance, steering him away from underground traps daytimes, patiently watching over him by night.

His face was scalded brick-red and etched with deep lines blackened by dirt and sweat. A coarse and ragged beard straggled over his chest. His eyeballs were bulging and bloodshot, his pupils dilated, but still his body kept on going with robotic single-mindedness.

Sometimes he rammed the point of his machete into the earth, jerked out his gun and fired more or less in the direction of things that would not have been deterred from attacking had the weapon been silent, but could not bear the sonic blast accompanying the bullets. A couple of times he shot at dragons that existed only in his fevered imagination. Every time he stopped for a rest he chatted with Little Koo and Feeny, threw brilliant witticisms at them and invariably got the most amusing replies.

Strangely enough he never forgot to feed the dog. Now and again he became so engrossed in their three-sided conversations that he completely overlooked the need to do some eating himself, but always he opened a pack for Feeny.

The ground rose considerably as he hit the end spur of the range of mountains. The jungle shrank away from stark rocks so that in due time he was tramping where the path had petered out and the overhead orb scorched without hindrance.

Higher, still higher insisted what he was using for a mind. He lurched up steep slopes, slid and skidded around treacherous outcrops but still struggled on. Try up the pass, the old man said. The *Star Queen's* lifting overhead. Who said Bill's among the dead? Excelsior!

Up a mile or a yard or an inch or whatever it was. Then a rest and a chat. Up another mile, yard or inch. His breath was being drawn spasmodically. His vision somehow lacked focus so that sometimes the ground reared unexpectedly higher or went dead flat and his feet were caught unaware by these swift changes of angle.

There was a pair of boney wrists pulling tremendously at his left hand and something dark and noisy dodging about in front of his stumbling feet. There were sounds all around and high in the sky and deep, deep inside him, blasting this world of silence and converting it to one of confusing uproar.

Oh, the barking and howling of the thing in front, and the rhythmic *whuyoum-whuyoum* throbbing from somewhere near that bitter furnace of a sun. And the voice now sounding thunderously inside him so that for once he could hear what it was saying.

"Come unto Me all ye that are weary and heavy laden."

He didn't give a damn for the voice. He never had done. Maybe it existed, maybe it didn't. But it used one word that interested him. Just one word.

All, it said.

It wasn't particular.

It had no preferences.

It said *all*.

“Quite right too!” he approved—and promptly plunged forward like a stricken bull and lay among the hot rocks while the brown thing licked his face and whimpered and the blue sun seared the alien soil.

The *whuyoum-whuyoum* lowered from its place in the sun and dropped a long, thin line with something like a great black spider on its end. The spider touched earth, split in two, became a pair of drab-uniformed men wearing tiny filters in their nostrils.

Tail vibrating furiously, Feeny sprang at one, tried to wash his features with a frantic tongue. The victim picked him up, held him close, pulling his ears and patting.

The other bent over the bodies, went back to the line, spoke into a small instrument at its end.

“Take credit for supersharp eyes, Al. You were right: it’s one fellow carrying another.” A pause, followed by, “They can’t be from anywhere else but that lifeboat. Pity they didn’t stay by it seeing we picked up its trace as it came down.”

“They’d no reason to hope for such luck,” came back the pilot’s voice from the floating ‘copter. “It took us ten days to locate it, anyway. They’d have lost patience and taken to the trails just the same.” He was silent a moment, went on, “Reckon I’d better call the dome on the short-wave, get them to send patrols along the routes from here to the boat. If there are any more survivors they’re sure to be on one of those paths.” He thought again, “That is, assuming they all headed the same way.”

“What d’you mean, any more survivors? These two are decidedly dead. The only escapee is a dog.”

“We’d better make further search all the same.”

“All right.” Leaving the line, the speaker returned to his companion.

“The big bruiser must have been at his last gasp when we spotted him,” informed the latter. “We were too late by a mere minute. The other one has been dead at least four days.”

“Then why the blazes was he carrying him?”

“Don’t ask me. Maybe it was his best pal.”

“What, a dried-up and smelly little Chink? Don’t be silly!” He’d never had reason to hear a voice.

All, it says. ♪



New Hard-Cover Science-Fiction Reviewed by

KENNETH F. SLATER

I've often wondered whether the heading our editor has selected for the column of mine means that I'm supposed to *suggest* something, or *provide* something for your reading. I conclude that in his own quiet way, Mr. Peter Hamilton is making a pun. . . . However, looking over my last few columns it seems that, so far as the "suggestion" part goes, it has been rather negative—I have been saying more about what you should avoid than what you should buy (beg, borrow, etc.).

Things are better this time, and if you have any slight preference for the short story over the novel, then I've a couple of recommends. First of these is *SPACE, TIME AND NATHANIEL*, by Brian W. Aldiss (Faber, 12/6, 208pp), which is a collection of fourteen tales by one of Britain's best young authors. It is not Mr. Aldiss' first book, he already has to his credit an excellent treatise on the vagaries of the bookselling business, *The Brightfount Diaries*, which I would recommend to you for light entertainment. But for the more serious student (of s.f.)

this collection is to be recommended. Opening out the "Space" section is a short but graphic account of the creation of the asteroid belt, and offers other explanations for why our solar system is like it is. Actually, this tale "T" is one of the few which I don't particularly appreciate; despite its twist to hide the point—Mr. Aldiss uses what I firmly believe is a novel method to disguise his "scenes of action"—it still belongs in a somewhat too overworked area. The second story is far better, in my opinion—*OUR KIND OF KNOWLEDGE* belongs in a class with van Vogt's *The Monster*, and certain of Eric Frank Russell's short epics of what man might become; for it has that underlying touch of humour which make those stories outstanding. *PSYCLOPS*, a drama of the unborn; *CONVICTION*, the judgement of man's fitness to join the Galactic civilisation (incidentally, there is something about this story which makes me think of Waters. . . .); *POGSMITH*, an ironic "Who Goes There?"; in fact, quite a collection depicting almost

every possible mood of storytelling. Worth an investment, for these are sort of things you can always re-read with positive pleasure, and feel sure of finding something fresh.

The second recommend is Theodore Sturgeon's **THUNDER AND ROSES** (M. Joseph, 255pp, 12/6) containing eight of the stories printed in the American collection titled **A WAY HOME**. The title story is a controversial item from Astounding S.F. of 1947; placing the problem: is revenge worth-while at the cost of racial suicide? Quite apart from other considerations I welcome the appearance of this story over here; it is a very satisfying answer to those people who still question whether science-fiction can be human, whether any "good writing" or "literary value" is possible in the field; whether s.f. is worth-while, etc., etc. This story is full of human warmth, of human horror, of human deceit and human courage; now that we have grown somewhat blasé over the atomic terror it may have lost a little of its original impact; a little—but not much. The other stories in the book are somewhat shadowed by this, I feel, but offer relief—**MEWHU'S JET**, giving what was when it first appeared a new twist to the alien problem; **THE HURKLE IS A HAPPY BEAST**, one of the best of the F. & S.F. series of "strange creatures" stories (I still think "The Gnurrs Come From the Voddvork Out" was the best); . . . **AND MY FEAR IS GREAT** . . . is a psi or magic story, according to your viewpoint; **TINY AND THE MONSTER**, another alien, but an

entirely different treatment; **BULKHEAD**, the training of a starship pilot; **MINORITY REPORT**, man's first extra-solar contact; **A WAY HOME**—the story selected for the title of the American collection, the shortest in this book, and a fitting conclusion. Let us hope that some more of Mr. Sturgeon's collections are reprinted over here, now that we've made a start.

I agree with the publishers of **DAY OF MISJUDGMENT**, by Bernard MacLaren (Gollancz, 15/-, 272pp) that it is difficult to describe this as science-fiction. Nevertheless, it falls within the range of interest of the s.f. reader, and in any case is a work well worth reading. The Watkins family, legally dead, are trekking across the Syrian desert in a battered old car (2020 model) to the Vale of Jehoshaphat, the "official" site for Resurrection and Judgement Day—at least, according to the Christians of this world of 2033 and as stated by their Oracle; a giant electronic brain.

On the way they pick up Warren, an American airman killed when his 'plane crashed in 1949, and who has been resurrected a little out of the order of precedence; and conversations between Fred Watkins (Dad), his wife and their two children, Spiv and Susan, on one side and Warren on the other soon help fill in the background for the reader—highly important, too, for at this early stage in the book it was with great difficulty that I restrained myself from jumping forward to try to find answers to my many questions. Shortly after

picking up Warren, other additions to the party are made: Lisa Maria de Vittoria, an Anglo-Portuguese beauty who drowned herself in 1921, and Beppo, an elderly boatman who had died in trying to prevent her. Beppo returns to life as a child, and plays only a small although important role in the story.

Here then are the main protagonists of the book; the antagonists—with the exception of the Oracle (which exemplifies the subconscious of all mankind)—are mainly passive or else obstructionist in their urgent pursuit of their own all-important affairs; such affairs as order of precedence in the various royal houses (does Elizabeth I outrank Victoria?), the gatherings of social lions now possible—Wilde, Whistler and Chesterton at the same tea is quite a scoop—the essential bureaucratic red-tape of documenting, labelling, segregating; in the face of all this activity Lisa Maria, Warren and Spiv try to discover the truth of this rather mismanaged resurrection.

The book is witty in places, serious and moral in others; exciting, thoughtful, and above all entertaining. Recommended.

Among the mystery novels you'll find *THE POWER*, by Frank M. Robinson (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 190pp, 11/6). This was an American S.F. Book Club choice, so you can decide for yourself what to call it—for my money it is a fine example of how to "cannibalise" an out-worn idea, a short-story plot, and write a novel. And, what is more, make it a very successful one at that.

The idea—the power—is that of mental control of other people, telepathy, and assorted ill-defined "psi" powers. This, of course, used to be the glowing-hypnotic-eyes-at-the-window of the Fu-Manchu type epic; it got made over to s.f. in a novel form at least as far back as Hubbard's *THE TRAMP*, in 1938. The prime use of the power seems to be to control others; the main purpose of this control by the mutant superman is to keep himself hidden and unknown.

Unfortunately, circumstances combine to give away the presence of this superman in a top-secret project; and Tanner, the hero, realising the meaning of the evidence (the real truth doesn't strike him until the end of the book) starts looking for the sm, the sm starts gunning (mentally) for Tanner. Thus follows the mystery/s.f. novel, complete with tons of horror (Tanner's companions get knocked off, one by one, all faked to seem accidents) etc., etc. The book is absolutely loaded with suspense; it is a pity that the plot is also loaded with holes—for instance, with his superb control of others it would seem to have been easy for the sm to kill Tanner immediately after Tanner's suspicions arose, and make it out to be an accident; of course, this would have meant the story was a short-short—but if you don't look too closely you'll find it enjoyable, and sufficiently gripping to be a one-sitting book.

Now a few short mentions. *BLAST OFF AT WOOMERA*: Hugh Walters (Faber 12/6, 202 pp) is a teen-age/adult suspense story, not quite s.f., built around

Britain's rocketry experiments, the beginnings of space-travel and espionage; suspenseful and plenty of action. **A LAND FIT FOR 'EROS:** John Atkins & J. B. Pick (Arco, 12/6) is a sort of whacky "Goon Show" in book form, not s.f. but with some appeal to the fans who like whacky things such as the "Mad" comics (I mention this because that section of fandom is one of the strongest and most vociferous); **SEVEN DAYS TO NEVER:** Pat Frank (Constable, 15/-) is again borderline; a team of experts in the Pentagon have the job of forecasting the future acts of the enemy; they do this—and successfully—but the enemy plan is so outrageous that they cannot get any of the service heads to believe them. Only borderline, but highly recommended as excellent reading.

FOR SALE

American science fiction magazines and books at bargain prices. Send 2½d stamp for list, to T. Moulton, 58 Rathlyn Avenue, Layton, Blackpool, Lancashire, England.

BOOKS

"Venus Speaks"—Flying Saucers, 5/-; "Hypnotism" 3/6; "Atlantis Rising" 11/6; "News-cast Magazine"—Flying Saucers, etc. 1/3. Phenomenist Research, 87 Fairfax Drive, Southend, Essex. All books post free.

ONE GUINEA PRIZE

To the reader whose Ballot Form (below) is first opened at the NEBULA publishing office.

All you have to do, both to win this attractive prize and to help your favourite author win the 1957 Author's Award, is to number the stories in this issue in the order of your preference on the Ballot Form below and post it to NEBULA, 159, Crownpoint Rd., Glasgow, S.E., immediately.

Treason	
All The Worlds Tears	
The Pool	
Dream World	
Somewhere A Voice	
Name and Address	

Mr. James Niven of Bothwell wins the One Guinea Prize offered in NEBULA No. 19. The final result of the Poll on the stories in that issue was :—

1. THE GREAT ARMADAS
By Kenneth Bulmer 20.1%
1. THE NUMBER OF MY DAYS
By John Brunner 20.1%
3. WHISPERING GALLERY
By William F. Temple 19.6%
4. CITY AT RANDOM
By Philip E. High 17.5%
5. DUMB SHOW
By Brian W. Aldiss 8.8%
5. FLESH AND BLOOD
By Robert Presslie 8.8%
7. THE EVIDENCE
By Ian Wright 5.1%

The result of the Poll on the stories in this issue will appear in NEBULA No. 24.

SCIENTI FILM PREVIEWS

News and advance Film Reviews direct from Hollywood's
FORREST J. ACKERMAN

THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN, screenplay by Richard Matheson from his pocketbook, is an exceptionally good job of translation to sight and sound. The Powers That Be gave Matheson his head—the bloody severed one that one generally thinks of him carrying around under his arm—and he kept tautly cerebral control of it until the final few moments when the dialogue became a little *too* cerebral for my brain cells to accept. But it by no means spoils the picture, which I anticipate seeing again.

The film version unfolds in an orderly fashion rather than the seesaw of the book. Before even the first foot of live action is seen, the eye is intrigued during the presentation of credits by the diminishing silhouette of a man on the left quarter of the screen while a pinpoint of light blossoms from the middle into the deadly doorknob form we have been familiar with since 1945, an atomic cloud; and the ear is wooed by a melodically modern trumpet solo for shrinking men, beautifully blown by Ray Anthony. The mood is set for an "A" production, and an "A" is what we get and what I give leading man Grant Williams (as Scott Carey), director Jack Arnold, the wonder-working technicians and producer

Albert Zugsmith.

Fans who have read the book have criticized the *modus diminuendi* as its weakest point. It is no fatal flaw as presented on the screen, in fact I think hits just about the right spot for the "masses". Mr. and Mrs. Carey—Scott and Louise—are a natural, normal young pair of married Americans, so that the simple nature of the incident that blights their lives will be found believable, I believe, by the usual moviegoer. And if you are not the ciné-norm, you may incline to be charitable to the "explanation" in order to get on with the engrossing, or de-grossing, business of the shrinking.

Internal interruption: As Whillis—a Ghod of Phantasy—is my witniss, while typing the preceding paragraph an INVASION OF TERMITES was discovered in my basement. This meant, à la the Shrinking Man, that it was necessary for me to man the spray gun, getting, like Scott Carey, a dose of insecticide inside in the process. There are no vagrant wisps of radioactive clouds (that I know of) in this area, but the smog sometimes gets as thick as the London fog, and I hope no unfortunitous combination of the two causes any catalytic catastrophe with my metabolism à la the Matheson formula.

So irradiated bug poison in his system causes Scott Carey to lose his sanforization: he begins dwindling at the rate of an inch a day. Mild concern gives way to bewilderment, dismay, when it is demonstrated beyond doubt that he is losing height in unprecedented fashion.

The nice part about this movie is that there is no mad doctor motif. Carey is not a lone wolf laboratory scientist, cracked like a test-tube, intent on making his enemies look small; he's just a nice guy to whom this unholy thing happens, and he reacts much as the average individual probably would under the unique circumstances. Dwindling has been seen on the screen before; in DEVIL DOLL from A. Merritt's "Burn! Witch! Burn!" and in DR. CYCLOPS, fictionized after the film by Henry Kuttner in short story form and Manly Wade Wellman in book; but never on such an elaborate scale. All concerned with the production deliberately made it difficult on themselves by undertaking to show Carey active in a dozen different stages of reduction. The resultant cinemagic is fascinating to behold. The earlier in-between sequences held my attention more than the climatic where, if one stopped to think about it, one realised the sets *had* to be built on a giant scale in order to give the illusion of the man being that small. Cleverly, one is not allowed much pause to wonder—too many exciting things are constantly happening. There was a lapse of a year, perhaps, between the time I read the book and saw the picture, so I don't recall the former with complete clarity, but I have the feeling only an episode or two was

omitted. The temporary romance with the female midget (I'd not shrink from an introduction to April Kent!) comes off well, as does Carey's dwelling in the doll house and cat-and-mouse encounter with his pet turned predatory colossus. The spider menace is genuinely shuddersome. Life as a Lilliputian in an abandoned basement is a bed of razors for one born of man and woman.

I said I found the ending unconvincing. Incommunicado with his wife and the rest of the human race, Carey—no "cold-blooded" scientist but a warm, emotional person—becomes reconciled to his fate, vocally philosophizes about it, even looks forward to life as a molecular mote. You might; I might; after all, *we* know we might meet up with Ray Cummings' Girl in the Golden Atom; but Carey cared too much about everyday life and people to make his acceptance of the alien infinitesimal acceptable to me. It just seemed inconsistent with his character.

Kerchoo! Damn that smog! Say, I thought my typewriter was a portable—it looks somehow suddenly larger, standard size. Later: met the teenage girl next door on my way to the mailbox . . . either she has shot up to 6 feet or I am—?

SHRIEKING!

(Editor's Note: As I opened Mr. Ackerman's airmail envelope from America, a strange thing happened: an ant crawled out. Stranger still, I thought I heard it cry "Help!" I am concerned lest our scientifilm reviewer should have been belittled by his critics. P.H.)



WALTER WILLIS writes for you—

We all know what the intrepid spaceman will look like, don't we? A tall, bronzed, clean-limbed godlike young man, resplendent from jackboots to epaulettes, with steely blue eyes focused firmly on Alpha Centauri and chin jutting determinedly in the direction of Rigel. At least, that's how he looked from a couple of dozen years away. Now that we're so much nearer, how about a closer look?

Ted Tubb has already broken the news to us that he's probably a midget, to save vital space and weight. For the same reason, that uscless gaudy uniform will have to go. He'll have to wear some clothes to prevent spacesuit sores, but something resembling long woollen underwear would cover his requirements admirably. The torso can be baggy but the legs will almost certainly be elasticised on account of the poor fellow's varicose veins—all those changes in gravity, you know. But no jackboots, I'm afraid. They're just the job for stamping on the villain's hand as he's scrabbling for his blaster, but no good at all for clambering round 180 degree angles in free fall. Something like tennis shoes would be far more comfortable for all hands, including that of the villain. The "uniform" will

probably be grey in colour . . . or at least it will end up that way, it being difficult to wash out one's smalls in a spaceship. For similar reasons his teeth will be in a bad way, which is unfortunate really because his health isn't too good anyway (not much roughage in those concentrates you know) and the pimples show up rather against his pale complexion. (He has to be screened against that dangerous solar radiation.) Not that his stomach has much of a chance in any case, what with him going about on all fours most of the time. This is obviously the only sensible means of progression in free fall if he's to make proper use of his magnetic wristbands. It's a pity he has to pad about like an ape, but those magnetic boots are tricky things and if he tries to stand upright he'll almost certainly kick himself off and hang there in space upside down. Another little snag about those magnetic boots is that unless he keeps them well apart they're liable to stick to each other every time he takes a step, throwing him flat on his face. Fortunately he has acquired a special sort of waddling gait to lessen the incidence of this embarrassment.

So what does our intrepid spaceman look like on closer

inspection? A skinny knock-kneed round-shouldered pimply dwarf, suffering from toothache, varicose veins, constipation, halitosis, B.O., ulcers, agoraphobia and duck's disease, shambling about in long combinations with his hands brushing the ground. Momentarily he gives the impression that after half a million years of evolution we're back where we started. But I wouldn't waste any sympathy on *him*. Not only beauty, but handsomeness, is in the eyes of the beholder. And since homo spaceman is the new pioneer survival type, all the girls will be crazy about his style of looks. No, he'll be all right, Jack. What's worrying me is us. What's going to happen to all us tall bronzed clean-limbed godlike young men?

FANZINE REVIEWS

Camber No. 7. Alan Dodd, 77 Stanstead Road, Herts., England. 1/- per copy. This magazine has always been impeccably produced under its present editor, but has made great advances in the standard of its contents since its early issues. The main feature this time is a hilarious piece of fictional nonsense by John Berry, but the most unusual one is a report on a Swedish s.f. fan convention by Alvar Appeltoft. Continental fandom is growing like a forest fire: or perhaps I should say a Forrest fire, in recognition of the services to international fandom of Forrest J. Ackerman. Other contents of this *Camber* include engaging little columns by Warren Link, Terry Carr and Robert Coulson, all Americans (*Camber* has always been more

oriented towards the States or should that be occidented. than most British fanmags), a well-written but confusing piece of fannish fiction by Ron Bennett, and a simply dreadful piece of shaggy-dogery by Dave Jenrette. There are also reviews and readers' letters. In one of the latter Warren Link complains about the staples falling out of the last issue and makes the revolutionary suggestion that this is an attempt by fanzines to reproduce themselves. As a publisher myself, I consider this a consummation devoutly to be wished.

The New Futurian No. 6 Mike Rosenblum and Ron Bennett, 7 Grosvenor Park, Leeds 7, England. 9d. per copy. Mike Rosenblum has now gone into partnership with the editor publisher of *Ploy*, Ron Bennett, and the idea is to issue each fanzine alternately. A very fine thing too if Bennett's energy can bring out *The New Futurian* more frequently. This is a serious (but not solemn) fanmag devoted primarily to the intelligent discussion of science fiction, and has been much missed during its period of suspended animation. The frothy fanmags full of fun that are popular nowadays are all very well, but they need the subsoil of serious interest in s.f. to grow from. The contents of this issue include an article by E. R. James touching on his own methods of writing, an article about modern music by Harry Warner, a vivid report on the New York Convention by Bob Pavlat, a piece of fan history by veteran Sid Birchby and other excellent material.



GUIDED MISSIVES

Letters to the Editor



Dear Ed.: NEBULA No. 19 and its front cover seemed quite excellent except "The Evidence" by Len Shaw—I am glad it was the shortest story. A matter of taste, of course, but I prefer tales that give me something to think about and remember.

Mr. Willis' piece was very entertaining—I am glad to know that it costs the offending editors so much per word, they deserve it!

I wonder what is the sore on which your correspondent Mr. Welsh of Kettering is picking so industriously?

I hope you can manage to produce NEBULA monthly and of course keep its standards.

Mrs. E. MAYER,
London, S.E.18.

** As you will have noticed in my Editorial this time, NEBULA is to be published monthly from the current number. I have a great many very fine stories on hand so I do not think there should be any need to fear a drop in the high standards we have set meantime.*

Looking further forward, I believe there are a great many science fiction readers who possess a potential writing talent which has as yet remained undeveloped and so it

is largely up to our present and future authors whether or not we can make a success of a monthly schedule when it comes. I have done my bit by raising my authors rates yet again.

Dear Ed.: Whispering Gallery by William F. Temple which appeared in NEBULA No. 19 did not strike me as being science fiction at all but was nevertheless an excellently written ghost story and should have a far wider appeal to the general public than any normal science fiction story.

Is this a new trend in the policy of NEBULA? Do you intend to print merely material with a scientific or fantasy background rather than confining yourself to orthodox science fiction and thus perhaps increase the appeal of your magazine to the man in the street?

JAMES ELLIS,
Newcastle-on-Tyne, 2.

** Naturally the policy of NEBULA has always been, and will continue to be, governed by the tastes and preferences of the thirty thousand or so people who read it every two months and while "Whispering Gallery" has been reasonably popular with a good number of my readers I definitely do not foresee any dras-*

tic change in policy when selecting material for future issues. I will very probably publish a few fantasy and off-trail yarns from time to time if they come up to the standard required for the magazine, but NEBULA will continue to print first class science fiction stories in preference to other types of material. The simple reason for this is that we have built up a large circulation by adhering to this policy in the past and wish to remain loyal to that readership rather than pursuing the possibility of a much less stable and poorer quality readership elsewhere.

Dear Ed.: I was delighted to receive my copy of NEBULA No. 16 and have just finished a cover to cover reading (and re-reading some passages) of this exceptionally fine issue.

Each story held especial personal interest for me hence a comparative judgment of their merits is very difficult.

I was a one time leading lady at the Pasadena Playhouse and later turned to technical work as secretary after which I was head of the music department at Columbia Picture Corporation in its formative years (1930-1932). Sometimes I doubled for the stars in such miniscule details as a close-up of a female hand signing a letter (one star had burned the index finger of her right hand and though make-up could cover the ugly spot—the finger was still too sore to stand the pressure of pen to paper for an effective close-up—so I “was” the lady’s right hand in the close-up shot). I was the voice of another star who

“couldn’t carry a tune in bucket” and who had to hum a few notes of a familiar old lullaby in a dramatic scene in the picture. She made the scene silently and I made the sound-track for those few notes after the picture had been cut.

Hence, “Dying to Live” the story of old actors turned into the personnel of Mannikin Theatre Puppets had a great appeal for me. Tubbs’ excellent and casually realistic style made the story a living tribute to the actors dying in emotional responses only so they could earn the money to live.

Then I read “The Moron” by John Seabright and my six years as a university student of Philosophy and Psychology rose up and *cheered* the courageous bravery of an author who dares to bludgeon educational complacency with the terrible term “moronic”.

In all my years of study I was fortunate, perhaps, in only once encountering that frightening mentality—the educator who was over-educated beyond his own intelligence—a Moron in his conceit of himself and his fear of students who used their own brains and experiences instead of his “dixits”.

So—from that personal experience Seabrights’ “Moron” simply enthralled me. His ending hit me with a deep sense of tragedy and insecurity.

“Frontier Encounter” by Sydney J. Bounds wins first place in my judgment however.

I have for a long long time been hammering away at editors, “fans”, writers and the casual readers of science fiction to get away from the damnable specie-

centric and solar-centric view of the Universe which assumes that out of all space and time only we furless bipeds are beneficent in our colonization.

It is with hopeful joy that I must give my first choice for plot to this story and also my first choice for characterization.

I, too, have been for most of my life the sort of woman who had the admiration and respect of the men with whom I worked but could not get the critters to notice me as a *woman*. I cannot see either any reason to be afraid of another life form simply because of a difference in shape and colour or number of limbs or eyes.

I especially liked Bounds' warmth in ending his story in the most universally understood co-operative motive of all—the love of man and woman.

Mrs. JULES MOCABEE,
Stockton 6, California,
U.S.A.

** Thank you very much indeed for an exceptionally interesting letter Mrs. Mocabee. I trust you will find the stories in other issues as much to your liking as were those in our 16th issue. In any case I am sure I am speaking for all my readers when I say how much I look forward to hearing from you again.*

Dear Ed.: I have been writing angry letters to science fiction and fantasy editors, authors and reviewers on this particular point for so many years that I have come to think of it as my

life's work. Quite simply:—Frankenstein was not a monster he was a scientist who created a monster.

Now what about your film reviewer Ackerman in NEBULA 20? (I am quoting):—"Frankenstein, most durable of monsters . . . a perennially revived indestructible creation, etc., etc."

Please pass on the tart suggestion that he keeps us well boned up on some of the basic fiction (notably Mary Shelley) as no doubt he does on Willey Ley. He doesn't want the Curse of Frankenstein does he?

Rob Jones,
Flint.

** Tart suggestion passed on as requested.*

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FAR DISTANT FIRES—*Continued from inside front cover*

achieved was made by the Mount Palomar 200 inch telescope when light from a group of galaxies called Cluster 1448 reached us after travelling across space for 1,800 million years. The red shift on the plates was the most pronounced yet observed and suggested that the galaxies were moving away from us at a speed 40% of that of light.

This is an astonishing figure, more noteworthy than the immense distance at which the enigma originated, and astronomers are casting about for theories to explain it in terms other than an expanding Universe. Some of the new ideas that seek to explain the origin of the galaxies also do not admit of this figure. The Continuous Creation theory, which postulates that hydrogen atoms are being formed permanently throughout space to be swept up and create fresh suns, suggests that the Universe is in a steady state.

Even the life history of a galaxy is surrounded in mystery. Observations show us that there are three types of galaxy. The irregular galaxies are few in number and extend a sprawling, unformed mass of stars and dust in ragged cloud formations. They contain many hot new blue stars which blaze with reckless expenditure of energy—the Magellanic clouds are typical examples—and it is believed that they are young galaxies not yet evolved into the later stages.

At the other extreme are the elliptical galaxies, placid featureless agglomerations of old red stars containing no gas and dust from which fresh blue stars could be born. These galaxies are dying from the lack of fuel to replenish their fires.

Between these two types of galaxy stand the spiral type, a profusion of large and beautiful galaxies of which our Milky Way is one and of which perhaps the best known is the Great Nebula in Andromeda.

All contain many new and old stars and much gas and dust, except those which have been in collision, when the debris is swept clean, leaving only the skeletal arms like the limbs of a blighted tree. Their most marked characteristic is the spiral arm; over 80% of the brighter galaxies are spiral and no less than a third of these have a central bar connecting opposite arms across the central globe. These are the Catherine wheels of the Universe.

The Sun rotates in the Galaxy roughly two-thirds of the way out from the hub and completes a single revolution in 230 million years. But stars midway between us and the hub revolve in only 120 million years. Thus the whole system is sliding upon itself and is not a solidly revolving mass.

These three types of galaxy illustrate the postulated beginnings, life and death of the galaxies; and yet the Continuous Creation theory would also call for new galaxies being created from time to time as distinct from the conception of a single initial explosion.

As there are 1,000 million galaxies visible within the range of the 200 inch telescope and the new radio telescopes are discovering many more, the field of research is staggeringly wide in its scope.

The lights in the sky that have drawn men's eyes upwards for thousands of years are the immediate challenge; but beyond them, dwarfing the stars to insignificance, lie the galaxies. To uncover the secrets of the Universe to its uttermost depths is the manifest task of the human race. But long before we have discovered those secrets, man will be journeying out to the stars of his home galaxy.

And then he will stand on the rim, gazing outwards.

And the far distant fires will beckon.



Another scan
by
cape1736

